

kettering

the fanzine of elderly british comedy

No.
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Wotcha,

Welcome to this, the first issue of Kettering, the fanzine that covers the stranger, tucked away bits and bobs of '50s, '60s and '70s British comedy, along with a modest helping of new comedy writing. Why are we doing this? Well, it struck me some time ago that everyone I knew who loved British comedy of the era had one show, film, LP or what-have-you they loved with a passion, one which, as far as they knew, everyone else had either never heard of or had written off. This is the place for these peculiar passions. We hope to specialise in articles packed with previously overlooked material, original research and new insights.

This is by way of being a 'test' issue - a pilot, if you will. So any feedback will be gratefully received. If you would be interested in seeing another issue of this publication or have comments to make on this one, please let me know by filling out the accompanying paper slip and posting to our Kettering address (see below). You could also email me at clinty@stabbers.org, but I would prefer the paper slips because I hate trees.

Also, please let me know if you think you would like to contribute to any future issues of Kettering. We want articles full of intelligence and genuine critical appreciation. We're not after recycled material or secondhand opinions. We want interviews with the people who actually made the programmes or recorded the albums. In short, we want stuff that our readers will never have read anywhere else before and will make us look at that part of British comedy in a new light. My only request is that you contact me first before writing a word of the article itself so that we can discuss the best way for you to contribute to the bold new phenomenon that is Kettering.

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A User's Guide to the Great British Sitcom Movie

By Matthew Coniam

The origins of the late-sixties/seventies/early-eighties sitcom movie can be located in the British cinema of the late nineteen-fifties, and specifically in the British cinema's response to the threat of television. Throughout the fifties increasing mass-ownership of tv sets had become a pressing problem, and Hollywood, which had begun by mocking its pint-sized rival, had come to see it as a serious menace. (The 1955 Ealing film *The Love Lottery* is a late, and unusually British, example of this mockery.)

Far outstripping the British industry in resources, Hollywood's response to the problem was to throw money at it, in order to provide sensations that television could not offer. The switching-over from black and white to colour (previously saved for fantasy and special occasions) is attributable to this, as are various other fifties gimmicks, some of which survived (widescreen) and some of which did not (3-D). The proliferation of Cinemascope epics with their lavish battle scenes and location filming were conceived to lure audiences out of their homes and back into cinemas, and the same anxiety underpins such fifties moments as the pre-title sequence of Martin and Lewis's *Hollywood or Bust* (1956) saluting "the American movie fan" and the decision to precede *The Girl Can't Help It* (1957) with actor Tom Ewell's announcement that the film is shot in widescreen and "gorgeous, life-like colour by DeLuxe". The scene in Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960) in which Jack Lemmon's efforts to watch *Grand Hotel* on tv are frustrated by the proliferation of crude sponsors' announcements exorcises the same neuroses on the part of its makers.

But Britain could not afford to suddenly start making *Ben Hur*, so for its survival it hit on exactly the opposite tactic. Instead of giving tv audiences something they cannot experience at home, why not give them the very things they like experiencing at home, only bigger? It was sleeping with the enemy, but it worked.

Though smaller companies like Hammer made outright adaptations of tv and radio hits (and with their version of the BBC's *The Quatermass Experiment* scored a massive hit which set them on the path to horror success) the initial idea was usually to take a popular radio or tv comic and give them a big screen vehicle, often with a standardised plot that allowed



Bless This House

precious little room to display any of the distinctive comic style that had made them popular in the first place.

Again, this was nothing new. In earlier decades, British cinema had plundered the music hall and variety stages for stars, achieving notable successes with George Formby and Will Hay, but finding it more difficult to find a place for emasculated versions of Max Miller and Frank Randle. But in those days, films were bringing theatre performers to huge new audiences, and probably the majority of fans who flocked to *Let George Do It!* or *Oh! Mr Porter* had never seen their stars on stage.

This time, however, it was different. Huge audiences watched Frankie Howerd and Benny Hill and Charlie Drake on television, and thus knew that what they were getting in *The Runaway Bus* (1955), *Who Done It?* (1956) and *Sands of the Desert* (1960) wasn't

the same thing at all. Indeed, even when the films were genuinely good, audiences voted with their feet if the format deviated too far from that with which they were comfortable and familiar. Tony Hancock's two star vehicles for instance, *The Rebel* (1960) and *The Punch & Judy Man* (1962) are both far better than most critics will allow; the former in particular is able to take its place among his very best work. But while audience antipathy has been exaggerated in both cases, it is true that they were uncomfortable with the star's attempts to broaden his range, particularly in the case of the oddly gloomy second film.

On the hunt for box-office champs to replace the increasingly restless Norman Wisdom, Rank had three cracks at making movie stars of Morecambe & Wise. The public was unconvinced and posterity has recorded the experiment as disastrous, but in fact all three films are harmlessly enjoyable, and the first two in particular (1965's *The Intelligence Men* and 1966's *That Riviera Touch*) now seem genuinely cherishable. The problem, it seems, was simply that people did not and do not like Morecambe & Wise without the added response of a studio audience. Truly, television had taken over.

Oddly, when the fad for sitcom movies died out in the eighties, this older formula was briefly revived (shortly before it was decided that a British film industry of any kind had all been a terrible mistake). Three oddities resulted: Smith and Jones's ambitious *Morons From Outer Space* (1984), Kenny Everett's sporadically hilarious *Bloodbath at the House of Death* (1983) and Cannon & Ball's Will Hay remake *The Boys In Blue* (1983). Audience response to all three was decidedly lukewarm and seemingly for the usual reasons: because all three, especially the latter, were made without sufficient enthusiasm to give appropriate material to their stars. (Though according to a questionnaire in the 1983 *Cannon & Ball Annual*, to make a feature film was Tommy Cannon's foremost ambition. Bobby Ball's, still unrealised to the best of my knowledge, was to open a children's adventure playground.)

So what happened in between Morecambe & Wise contentedly marching in step with an all-dolly bird army at the end of *The Magnificent Two* (1967) and Bobby Ball trying to get a herd of cows through a traffic jam at the beginning of *The Boys In Blue*? What alternative formula did British film-makers hit upon to keep audiences out of their homes and in the cinemas?

Looking back, it all seems so ludicrously simple. Why bother trying to reinvent tv comics for the cinema and, as often as not, fail? Why not take a hit sitcom, bag the cast and writer, make a feature film version and give them what they know? This, with Hammer yet again at the forefront (along with British Lion and later Cinema Arts International), is just what they did.

A frame of mind informs all of these pictures, rendering them as discrete a unit as the films of German Expressionism or the French New Wave, the only difference being that these are lowbrow movies for mass audiences, not part of any artistic or cultural movement. Yet watching them, there is an aura; a sense of being invited into a club or initiated into some secret cult: a sense exaggerated by the critical ignominy in which most of the films themselves have always languished. They are time capsules, product of a film-making ethic more *Steptoe and Son* than Hollywood. Sitcom movies, and the whole world of seventies British low comedy of which they are part, have nothing to do with the exportable face of British cinema; with David Lean or Ealing or James Bond. These were the bastard children of British film, and they made it look ridiculously *easy*. Stanley Long's *Adventures of a Taxi Driver* (1976) may not loom as large in film history as those of Travis Bickle, but in Britain at least they took more money. And because the film was made on a budget of about a fiver, that meant a very comfortable Christmas for Mr and Mrs Long. Of course it had to end, and sure enough, when Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives entered Downing Street bringing hope where there was despair, harmony where there was discord, salt where there was vinegar and Laurel where there was Hardy, one of the first things they did was to cut the Eady Levy, a tariff which had ploughed a fixed percentage of all film profits directly

back into production. Next morning the lowbrow mavericks woke to discover that their industry could no longer support itself, and within a year only Derek Jarman's interminable home videos remained to remind us that there was ever any such thing as an independent British cinema.

Sitcom films are among the most truly British movies ever made. By which I refer not to the exclusive, Sunday-best Britishness of Ian Fleming and *The Avengers* but that unguarded, unromantic England-in-its-overalls that (to quote Philip Larkin's Lines *On A Young Lady's Photograph Album*) shows "dull days as dull, and will not censor blemishes". The film-making is best described as functional. Viewers of *George & Mildred* (1980), for example, will not fail to notice that the exterior of the restaurant in which the characters celebrate their anniversary is plainly a modest suburban bungalow with a string of fairy lights on the roof. They will also note the oddity that none of the characters in the early sequences feel obliged to comment on the howling wind sending their ties and hair in all directions as they converse in their front gardens. No American film would be made in such weather, this one doesn't even acknowledge it.

So how did it all work? The first problem was how to stretch thirty-minute sits into a ninety-minute com. Half-hour sitcoms are not half an hour by accident: it's about the right length. The usual solution was to graft a heavy-handed and unrealistic plot onto the familiar characters and settings. So *George & Mildred* begins with ten minutes or so of typical material, before sending its heroes off on a honeymoon to 'The London Hotel' (stopping off en-route at 'The Candlelight Restaurant') where a hitman makes several failed attempts to kill them after George is mistaken for a gangster.

This plays especially strangely in comedies where the central situation is essential to the point of the programme. For instance, *Man About The House* was a mildly risqué series about a heterosexual man sharing a flat with two girls. Come fresh to the 1974 film, however, and you will be baffled at how little is made of this in its story of a crooked property developer and his attempts to knock down their house.

Sitcom films are always funnier when one imagines never having seen the original programme. How strange that a film called *Are You Being Served?* (1977), in which all the characters work at the same department store, should opt not to base the film in said store, but to send them all on holiday to the Costa Plonka (for which read: a few ramshackle sets at Pinewood).

The sense of strain is even more evident in the endlessly enjoyable *Bless This House* (1973), a mild generation gap sitcom which relied almost entirely on the presence of Sid James in

the lead. Faced with the task of making a film out of all of this, screenwriter David Freeman opted to push the clock back to the silent era and base the film almost solely around slapstick episodes. So we have uncontrollable hosepipes, people stepping in wallpaper paste, a farting, falling-to-pieces car like clowns have, wet cement calamities and an exploding shed. There's even a pie fight.

Of course, the better the writers, the more considered the screenplay. Two by Clement and Le Frenais, *The Likely Lads* (1976, a spin-off from *Whatever Happened To The Likely Lads?* despite the title) and *Porridge* (1979) have been opened out sensibly and in-keeping with the style of the originals. So, after a fashion, have Galton and Simpson's two *Steptoe and Son* movies, notable for their heightened sense of squalor and for their interestingly matter-of-fact use of the word 'wanker'. But of all of them, only *Dad's Army* (1971) really plays as a film in its own right, beginning with the forming of the Home Guard and ending with a Nazi siege in the village church. (Even so, there's at least twenty minutes of superfluous stuff around the middle of it.)

Be in no doubt. These were incredibly popular films. They even had their own sequels. There are two Steptoes and two Alf Garnetts. *On The Buses* (1971), Hammer's most successful film of its year, made it to three. *Up Pompeii* took on a life of its own at the movies: the 1971 spin-off was followed by two sequels in which the central character reappeared during the Crusades (*Up The Chastity Belt*, 1972) and the First World War (*Up The Front*, 1973).

Others twisted their original formats into incredibly complex new shapes. The spin-off of Thames TV's *Man About The House* ends at the studios of Thames Television, where the characters meet Spike Milligan and the cast of *Love Thy Neighbour* playing themselves. So the film exists in a world where George and Mildred are real people but *Love Thy Neighbour* is a television sitcom. This, I should confess, is one of my favourite



Man About The House

films and (along with *Bless This House*) the best illustration to newcomers of the peculiar joys of the form.

You have to see it: it's not something I can explain in words. Yes; the locations are wonderful (Maida Vale at its greyest and least hospitable), yes; the film-making is delightfully eccentric (the street where the characters live has a sign with its fictional name written on it next to the unobscured real one, one character hails a taxi outside Thames Television and asks to be taken to Thames Television), and yes; the cast is perhaps the finest ever assembled for a single film. But there's more to it than just that, or rather less to it... It's something purer, simpler than that. It's the essence of it, the taste of it, the air that it breathes. Great comedy, great cinema it plainly is not. But it is perhaps the classic example of a film that has such unconscious beauty in itself that it transcends its immediate purpose. (Remember Larkin's photograph album here.)

Every film, whether it knows it or not, is ambassador for a whole range of incidental concepts: a certain place, a certain moment in time, a certain set of values, impressions, ideas. And it is these things, often, that ingrain themselves deeper in the audience than the plot, or the acting, or the jokes, or some other superficial ingredient. And *Man About The House* seems to stake its claims, in particular its claims for London and for 1974, more vividly than any other I can think of.

And no other film makes me so curious as to what it was like actually making it. What sort of direction did the director give? Were there discussions about the script? Did Sally Thomsett say things like "I don't think Jo would say this" or Yootha Joyce ask what her motivation is for objecting to her husband cutting his toenails next to a bowl of salad? I find myself imagining conversations on set, between takes, during lunch breaks. I picture actors Richard O'Sullivan and Doug Fisher discussing the merits of film over television in the same spirit as that in which their characters Robin and Larry might compare blondes and brunettes. How would it feel to be actually out there on those streets as the cameras turned?

The point is this. You may well have seen *Man About The House* and have no idea in the world what mysterious delight I seem to be taking in it. But you do know what I'm talking about. I'm sure you can think of some other film that affects you in such a fashion, even if it's a much safer choice like *Casablanca* or *Annie Hall* or that one where Paul Hogan dies and comes back as an angel. We all acknowledge the power of film to invade our consciousness in such a fashion. It is not mere enjoyment, it is the desire to somehow make its world and ours the same, to be alive within it. There are of course films about this very phenomenon (like *Purple Rose of Cairo*) so I must assume that it presses buttons with

everybody. The choice is academic. For you: *Casablanca*. For someone who likes rubbish films rather than good ones: *A Clockwork Orange*. For me: *Man About The House*. Nowhere else is London so Londonish, or 1974 so 1974-ish, as Larkin would doubtless more poetically observe. It positively reeks of its moment, and one watches it in the same spirit in which one sinks into a warm bath. And by 'one' I of course mean me. Because everyone else thinks it's shit.

From their heyday, around 1972-5, the films thinned out as the decade wore on and the Eady money dried up. Their death was announced in 1980, when Cinema Arts put out two of the oddest: *George & Mildred*, made shortly before the death of its star Yootha Joyce, and *Rising Damp*, made shortly after the death of its star Richard Beckinsale. This latter is chiefly notable for being composed largely of chunks of the tv scripts rather than an original screenplay, and for the extent of its deviations from the original format. Relocated to London in a big white house (instead of the beautifully brown tv set) the film featured the plot revelation that Don Warrington's Philip is only pretending to be an African chief and a disco-style theme song (*Rising damp is climbing up the walls, Rising damp is out there in the halls, Rising damp is gonna get us all!*). Token reference is made to the fact that the late Beckinsale's character has moved away, but nobody seems to notice that replacement Christopher Strauli has been given all his old dialogue.

Alas, it all ended here. We never got to see a film version of *Open All Hours* in which Arkwright and Granville try to fight off competition from a new supermarket by releasing rats in the food hall and setting off stink bombs. Cruel fate denied us the *Hi-De-Hi* movie, in which oil is discovered under Maplin's holiday camp, and Ted Bovis becomes a millionaire oil dealer. And we can only dream of the film of *Terry & June* in which the pair inherit a haunted castle from Terry's mysterious uncle, only to discover that the 'ghosts' are really villains trying to scare them away so that they can find loot hidden in the building by its previous owner.

But perhaps we should be thankful for the ones we do have. After all, it now seems so unlikely that this whole adventure ever happened, we really should be grateful that *Man About The House* and *Bless This House*, two of the most adorable comedies of British film history, exist at all. And no, I'm not being ironic. I really mean it.

Note: An entirely different version of this article first appeared in the May 1996 issue of The Comedy Review. The reason it was entirely different was because it was not so much edited as gutted, and completely rewritten without my permission. As well as adding large numbers of errors, inane 'jokes' and opinions I do not hold, the magazine decided to give individual paragraphs puerile titles, such as 'Seventies Plotless Rubbish' and 'There Wuz Only Three Good Uns'. Not only that, but it took about a year to get any money out of the bastards. — MC

Vinyl Obsucra

A regular feature on the lost art of the comedy album – not just those with sketches and clips from famous TV or radio shows, but also those records created purely for their own sake. Expect to see the words "produced by George Martin" come up a lot. This week...

FUNNY GAME, POLITICS: or How The Dogs Went To The Country (1964)

Featuring Millicent Martin, Kenneth Cope, Roy Kinnear, Lance Percival, William Rushton. Written by Peter Lewis and Peter Dobereiner. Produced by George Martin. Parlophone PMC 1225

Side 1 – Who Do You Fancy/ Call To Action/ Listen With Mother/ Good Day To You, Sir/ H.P. Sauce/ Zero
Zombie Swings Liberal/ Policy For Britain/ Funny Game. Politics

Side 2 – Consumers' Guide/ Raise The Standard – 1/ My Dear Prime Minister/ Mr Wilson At Home/ This'll Kill
You/ Raise The Standard – 2/ How To Be Happy With The Bomb/ Raise The Standard – 3

The summer of 1964, a General Election was looming and the satire boom that had been so central to British comedy for the last four years was, for the most part, dead and gone. *Beyond The Fringe*, the stage show which had started it all back in 1960 (despite not containing all that much actual satire) was drawing to a close. One member of the original cast, Jonathan Miller, had already left during the show's Broadway run, and the other three were soon to follow. It went on for a couple of years with various replacement casts, but became a shadow of its former itself.

The Establishment, the satirical nightclub and brainchild of one of the Fringers, Peter Cook, had gone into terminal decline in 1963, and by the next year was being overrun with gangland heavies, gradually becoming just another Soho club with only a passing interest in political cabaret.

Private Eye, who had seen their circulation build up over the years until reaching astronomical heights in 1963 during the Profumo Scandal, had then seen them fall again just as quickly as satire went out of fashion.

And then, in December 1963, the last ever *That Was The Week That Was* was broadcast. In the space of two series, *TW3* (as it was referred to) had revolutionised the public's idea of what could and could not be said on television. Indeed, when viewed even in our own jaded times, some sketches (such as the This Is Your Life parody with Willie Rushton as home secretary Henry Brooke) retain much of their initial impact.

TW3 had managed to mightily piss off many within the establishment. (It had also managed

to piss off quite a few of its own fans and supporters by broadcasting, in their penultimate show, a fawning eulogy to the recently assassinated President Kennedy - a tribute many felt had no place in a satirical show.) Some of *TW3*'s detractors may point out that it had merely built on the work of people like *Private Eye* and *Beyond The Fringe*, but what it did do was take satire from its mainly Westend audience and broadcast it around the nation. Most people could not or would not trek all the way to



London to watch the Fringers or spend an evening at *The Establishment*, but they could easily catch David Frost and the cast on their televisions on a Saturday night.

Funny Game Politics is a direct descendent of *TW3*. It contains all the regular *TW3* cast, minus Frost, and is scripted by two of the TV show's main writers, Peter Lewis and Peter Dobereiner, two *Daily Mail* journalists turned satirists. As with *TW3*, it consists of a number of quick sketches, along with a handful of musical items, performed in front of an audience. It's a stripped down version of *TW3*, lacking such items as Millicent Martin's opening song or Lance Percival's topical calypso, but still has much the same feel as the original show.

Many of the items have a feeling of familiarity about them. The opening track is a husband and wife dialogue with a likeable Hancock feel to it. There's a *Listen With Mother* parody, which has since become something of a cliché of the form. *How To Be Happy With The Bomb* feels very like *The Great Train Robbery* sketch from *Beyond The Fringe*. In addition *Consumers' Guide*, a comparative study of each of main political parties done as if they were different brands of detergent, is reminiscent of the classic *TW3* sketch *A Consumers' Guide To Religion*, originally written by Robert Gillespie and Charles Lewsen.

Not that any of this detracts from the quality of the material. In fact, what they bring home

is that the album was made during the period when what we now think of as clichés of political satire were first being played around with. Also surprising is how much of the material would be easily transferable to today. Many of the album's jokes at the expense of Harold Wilson living in Hampstead could be used with Tony Blair and Islington. Jokes about the ineptness of the Liberal Party apply equally well to the Lib Dems. A sketch about a political party hiring a pop group (led by Zero Zombie) fits perfectly with New Labour's attempts to court favour with the likes of Oasis and Jarvis Cocker. The stand out piece for me, however, is *This'll Kill You*, a Roy Kinnear monologue about the morality of selling tobacco. The speech is delivered with all the dry wit and satirical bite of *TW3* at its best and is a classic of the form.

The album was made at the suggestion of producer George Martin. After the end of the second series of *TW3*, those on high at the BBC let it be known that there was to be no third series. The 1964 General Election was approaching and the Beeb's hierarchy decided it was far too dangerous a time for comedians to be taking the mick out of the great and good. Martin approached Lewis and Doberiner and the cast and suggested that, if the BBC didn't want a *TW3* for the election, why not put one out themselves on record? The only main member of the *TW3* cast missing from the LP is David Frost owing to a certain amount of bad feeling between Frost and the show's other cast and writers.

Funny Game Politics was performed in front of an audience as a one-off show at Abbey Road. As with almost everything else about the album, everything was arranged at the last minute and there was no time to get proper publicity for the recording session, with the result that 'invitations' to the show took the form of posters stuck up in the local hospital.

According to Peter Lewis, the LP was written, rehearsed and recorded in a "hell of a hurry", in an attempt to get it out in time for the election. As it turned out, the record finally appeared only "a couple of weeks before the election", says Lewis. "By the time it came out everyone was pretty much sick of [the election]." The poor timing of the album's release ensured that it sunk almost without trace.

With hindsight, though, it's a fascinating document. This was the last gasp for *TW3*. The cast never again fully reassembled and went to their various careers in *Private Eye*, *Carry On* films, *Brookside* and US sitcoms. As for the writers, Peter Lewis and Dobereiner went on to write for *BBC3* and *Not So Much A Programme More A Way Of Life*, both successors to *TW3* but which failed to recapture the original's popularity. Dobereiner, a New Yorker who came to England to study at Oxford in the 1940s, went on to become a golf writer for the *Guardian* and *Observer*, and edited many highly popular books of golf humour until his death in 1996. Lewis continues his career as arts reviewer for *The Daily Mail*.

Many thanks to Peter Lewis for his invaluable help in writing this article.

If It's Wednesday It Must Be...

By Peter Gordon

If ever there was a show that typified the phrase "They don't make them like that anymore," then surely it must be BBC Radio 4's *If It's Wednesday It Must Be....* The show ran for three series in 1972-73 and was intended to be a children's version of *Start The Week*, the grown-ups round table chat show which began life in 1970 and runs to this day. Broadcast during the school holidays, beginning with the summer break of 1972, it replaced the termtime programmes for schools every Wednesday from 9.35-10.15 in the morning. Each show would feature a series of guest slots all hosted by the naughty-uncle figure of one Kenneth Robinson. All the shows were produced by the man responsible for *STW*, Richard "Dickie" Gilbert (no relation to Jimmy Gilbert, the then-Head of BBC Television Light Entertainment).

The guests themselves were a strange mixture. Only two guests appeared in every show of the series run. One was Kenny Everett, Radio 1's enfant terrible disc jockey. Everett brought over many of his favourite routines from the Radio 4's hip cousin, including the Musicians' Walk Out sketch and his nasal Eleanor Rigby singalong, as well as taking the opportunity to introduce the station's middle class listeners to the music of The Beach Boys, and, after one his sackings from Radio 1, letting loose a tirade against "those rat bags" in BBC management. The other ever-present guest was former Bonzo Dog Band leader Vivian Stanshall. Stanshall used his slot in a variety of ways. Sometimes he would tell a story weaved around a selection from his collection of old 78s, some of them embryonic versions of what would



Kenny Everett



Vivian Stanshall

later become his Rawlinson End saga (which at one point he rechristens "Rawlbottom"), which he was also doing on *STW* at around the same time. Other times Stanshall would just play some records and give theme-based chats (for instance feminism, mothers, loneliness) to the audience at home. Anyone interested in the early versions of his Rawlinson End stories, the fabulous, fantastical tales of a secluded pocket of English eccentricity and its strange cast of inhabitants, would do well to visit the Rawlinson End website at <http://www.rawlinsonend.org.uk> which includes many transcripts in its Radio Flashes section. At the end of this article we've included an extract from one of his stories, *Rawlinson End Part 11*, along with Stanshall's slot on the post-Christmas show where he gabbles and meanders away in a most delightful fashion. Another show has him presenting his section from The Edinburgh Fringe Festival where he was doing his *Men Opening Umbrella Ahead* show,

accompanied Bubs White and Gasper Lawall, which is where the poem below originated.

Other contributors were a mixed bag indeed, including Scottish absurdist poet Ivor Cutler, columnist and later celebrity alcoholic Jeffrey Barnard (a strange choice for a children's show, but there you are), Benny Green (Cockney band leader and broadcaster), hippy DJ Anne Nightingale and satirist Miles Kingston. Also in the mix were Ron Geesin (a experimental Scottish composer, reasonably big at the time for of his collaboration with Pink Floyd on the *Atom Heart Mother* album, but very much an artist in his own right), and Lady June, a hippy poetess from the Canterbury scene and part of the Gong/ Soft Machine crowd. The Credibility Gap also appeared, an American satire-sketch group featuring a pre-*Spinal-Tap-and-Simpsons* Harry Shearer.

The show's host, Kenneth Robinson, deserves special mention. Once an architect and concert pianist who was constantly getting sacked for playing practical jokes on his orchestras, Robinson had enjoyed a stint replacing Robert "No Relation" Robinson as the presenter of *Points Of View* on television in the mid-1960s and was making a name for himself as a broadcaster. Kenneth was already appearing as a guest on *STW*, where his speciality was to act as grumpy, rude counterpoint to the presenter Richard Baker's

diplomatic politeness. Although he did some other work, including narrating the children's animated series *Shadoks* (1973) and a number of appearances on the radio panel game *Just A Minute*, *STW* was to be his main job until 1986. During his time on the show he gained a reputation for being especially nasty to any female guests, once reducing Angela Rippon to tears by enthusiastically criticising her book, annoying Esther Rantzen to the point where she could no longer speak and provoking Pamela Stephenson into throw a jug of water over him on air. The end was in sight when in 1984, during a discussion about dating agencies for the disabled, Robinson quipped "You can hear the wheelchairs banging together all night in some parts of the country," provoking a tidal wave of complaints. When the end finally did come him two years later it cannot be said that he went with good grace. After Richard Baker bade him farewell on his final show, Robinson announced to the listening public "I'm not going. I'm not going. I've been given three days notice after fifteen years. It's a bloody disgrace." He died in March 1994 aged 68.

Here, then, is a little selection of Viv Stanshall's contributions to the show.

Poem

Citadels of concrete,
Shell of the eternal electric citizen,
All ready your cold iron hearts are rusted and,
However Snowden-sculpted you seem
From the soft tap and touch of children's games
And laundry bundles shoulder hugged,
To me you are the stuff of shivering shelters still
And base foundations.
That's not enough, for folk's sake.
*(note: this poem eventually featured among the lyrics on Stanshall's solo album Men
Opening Umbrellas Ahead (1974))*

Stories

Rawlinson End Part 11 - an extract

The story so far: Gwen and Maureen have become successful wrestlers and spend most of their time trying grips and practising in mud or fast setting jelly, their preference being for blackcurrant. Naturally this has somewhat inflamed Great Aunt Florrie, who lives on, remote and aloof as Miss Faversham [*sic*], at Rawlinson End. In her opinion, loosed from great Olympian height, the girl's choice of career has brought shame on the house of Rawlinson. Hearing of their magnificent win at the Fairfield Hall, Croydon, in a tag match against two shaven bears underwater, she tartly retorted, "So what? My beloved Ralph could play billiards on horseback when he was 18."

Had she but known it, her beloved Ralph was homeward bound and, in mid-Atlantic, was only a few hours from Southampton, and then some moments from Rawlinson End. The idea of seeing Roxanne again excited him. He wondered what, if anything, had changed. Certainly

the years had taken their toll on him. A dozen years, and yet it seemed merely the day before yesterday when, clear-eyed, spruce and eager for the expedition, he'd left for Venezuela. Ralph, a well-fleshed six-footer, sported three pairs of legs. He stared moodily at the green-scaled iridescent flying fish, skipping and fluttering as though being spawned under the huge liner as it lunged nearer, through the waves, toward Rawlinson End.

A po-faced steward reminded him that second sitting for lunch was already well entrenched in the entrée. The man had the simian posture and mental stature of a pigmy. Ralph couldn't care less, but at that very moment, snug in London's Soho in Cathartecles Khazi-Kebab And Puck House, his cousin, Peregrine Posenby-Rawlinson, was preparing to order. And Perry, as he liked to be called, knew just how.

[FX: *sitar*]

[*Bertie Wooster-ish voice:*] "I say, what say we start with a tandoori chicken numero uno, followed by a sag ghosht, just as a starter, then a 33, and 47, two Bombay duck and a soixante-neuf if I can get enough gin down you?" He smirked at the impressionable young porcelain person he was trying to impress.

"[*strangled laugh:*] Hnnhnnhnnn," she hnnhnnhnnnded and wondered vaguely what all this was going to cost her in terms of flesh.

"People have such funny ideas about taste. Nobody really makes their own minds up," said Peregrine, knowledgeably. "I mean, stand up the chap or chappess who hasn't got an Aubery Beardsley or Arthur Rakhm or 200 Motels - even though it's a load of rubbish including the poster - stuck on their walls."

Porcelain young thing remained respectfully silent.

Peregrine knew a lot about art, and especially the Impressionists: Gougin, Van Gough, Toulouse Latrec, Mike Yarwood, Pissaro the Irishman, Mani and Moni the Jewish boys. And Perry grinned and began to stroke the dusk-gray maroon flock mock-William Morris wallpaper suggestively.

"With my looks," he murmured, "you don't expect intelligence too do you, what?" He felt Very Important.

Very Important was sitting at the adjoining table and he didn't want to be felt at all, although he had considered rubber as a student.

"Look here," he gruffed, "Have you any idea how important I am? I'm incredibly important, and I'm getting more and more all the time. And bigger, much bigger." He indicated some spots of greenish effluvia spattered over his thighs and gargantuan-style loom stomach.

"I dare say a spot of the jolly old penicillin and a lie down in a darkened room would clear that up," murmured Peregrine, cooling to the subject.

"Penicillin be damned, it's Peace you toad," said V.I.P.

(note: parts of this story eventually appeared in the book of Sir Henry At Rawlinson End)

A Chat About Christmas

I was going to do something along the lines of "The Spirit Of Christmas Past", but in my

case I think "The Spirit Of Christmas Psst – er, what was that?, er, sorry, yeah –" would be more appropriate... I managed to type that "appropriate" with three p-s. Tuh, it's all go today. What the Dickens am I talking about? I think I'll eat some brazils to calm myself down. 183 calories per ounce, weight watchers.

[*talking while chewing nuts:*] Now all I need is a base song or a podge poem or a fat... Fatswallah. Er, no, can't find him. Hmm, these nuts make jolly good radio, don't they? Must research loud food. A loud food party: stuff that you couldn't help making a row with. You invite the most genteel of chums. You can imagine celery crisps, crackling, poppadoms... Poppa Dom, wasn't he the voodoo dictator of Haiti? Or was it Papiti? No, Papiti is the capital city of Haiti, as well you should know, where Gangrene, the famous French artist, made pornografitti all over the walls of Papiti and officials with whistles and brushes with bristle had to scrub all the places with Gangrene defacèd and they were in their faces in unmentionable places, but later found that the stuff they washed down was worth a small fortune or more.

[*MUSIC: Shirley Temple – Come And Get Your Happiness*]

Little Miss Wonderful Shirley Temple, and that brings me to parrots. I got an Amazonian green one for Christmas. He or she is as yet unnamed, but it's been called a few things when it manages to nip a finger. It seems to spend most of its time puffing up and threatening or just lazing around listening to records. Here's one I wrote and dedicated to my friend Rodney Rhino Slater, who used to play sax and horns in the old Dog band. Rod started keeping parrots about ten years ago. The main vocal is by yours smarmily, and parrotry – that's a real word, you can look it up – by Mr. Slater.

[*MUSIC: Bonzo Dog Band – Mr. Slater's Parrot*]

Eee, that takes me back. I wonder... I remember those endless hours stuffed in the back of a transit and the wonderful hospitality of the hoteliers: "Breakfast at 7.30 or 8.30?" What? We didn't get in till four in the morning. "That's [mumbles:] errgerwerger tea and biscuits."

My Aunt and Uncle went out to Kenya when I was 10. Immediately I bought myself "Teach Yourself Swahili", and began collecting Africana. My room bristled with spears, bedazzled with beadwork and masks. Then one day I heard a Tommy Steele record, I think it was "Rock [With] The Cavemen" or "Butterfingers" or something. Anyway, the next thing I take all my beautiful carvèd ceremonial paddles, ostrich egg-shell bead-bags, bracelets, necklets, kabasas and knobkerries round to the local junk shop and swap the lot for the worst finger-biting guitar in the world. I must have been mental. I learnt Donna and [croons:] "When you find your sweetheart..." Er, Arms, er, whatever that's called – it's four chords and a snifty one. From that I became a rock and roll star. None the less, the urge to explore the dark continent never left me.

[*MUSIC: Groucho Marx – Hello, I Must Be Going. After a couple of false endings record*]

with Groucho saying "Ha, fooled you that time, didn't I?"]

Nope, nobody fools Groucho. A genius, my hero. And it's good to play a record in its entirety for once.

But back to Africa. I'm hoping to nip off to Nigeria after the series, so here's some jolly Ghanaian high-life music from Oscar More Al Furè. Oscar got his name from people shouting "Oscar, more, more," etc. This song is conveniently called "Ta Ta", so, till next week, cheerio.

[MUSIC: Oscar More – Ta Ta]

If It's Wednesday It Must Be episode guide

Resident cast who appeared in every show (apart from the last one, see below):

Kenneth Robinson (host)

Kenny Everett

Vivian Stanshall

Guests:

Ivor Cutler [IC], Jeffery Bernard [JB], Ron Geesin [RG], The Credibility Gap [CG], Lady June Campbell-Cramer [LJ], Benny Green [BG], Anne Nightingale [AN], Miles Kingston [MK]

Producer for all three series: Richard Gilbert.

Every programme was broadcast at 9.35-10.15 AM during the school holidays Summer 1972 to Spring 1973.

Appearances are noted here in square brackets as they were billed in *Radio Times*.

SERIES 1: 28-6-72 [IC RG BG]; 5-7-72 [IC CG]; 12-7-72 [IC CG]; 19-7-72 [IC CG]; 26-7-72 [IC BG RG]; 2-8-72 [IC JB]; 9-8-72 [IC BG CG]; 16-8-72 [IC JB]; 23-8-72 [IC RG CG]; 30-8-72 [IC JB BG]; 6-9-72 [IC CG]; 13-9-72 [IC CG JB]

SERIES 2: 8-12-72 [LJ CG]; 13-12-72 [RG AN]; 20-12-72 [LJ MK]; 27-12-72 [BG CG]; 3-1-73 [LJ CG]; 10-1-73 [RG]

Note: Everett made EVERETT ON EVERETT during this time (BBC Radio 4 26-12-72 9.15-10.00 PM) also produced by Richard Gilbert. The show featured Everett only.

SERIES 3: 4-4-73 [RG IC]; 11-4-73 [RG LJ IC]; 18-4-73 [RG]; 25-4-73 [The final show was called *IF IT'S WEDNESDAY IT MUST BE AMERICA*, which Kenneth Robinson hosted from New York. The show featured none of the other resident cast, and had guests *The Credibility Gap* and *Monty Modyn*]

THE MENTAL HEALTH ACT

A Story By Graeme Payne

"He was just sitting there. He couldn't speak. I couldn't ask him to speak. It's a *talking* therapy for crying out loud."

We were in the pub, The Social Influence, across the street from the hospital and I was telling him. He laughed and sipped his beer.

"So what did you do?"

"I gave him The First Session spiel and managed to spin that out for a while but that only took around quarter of an hour."

"Then?"

"I just sat there and listened to him plinking."

"Beethoven?"

"Plinking Beethoven."

"Language. You'll get us barred."

"They can only do it once."

"So, it isn't just his mouth?"

"Apparently not. From what the notes say. There was supposed to be pictures in the file but they forgot. They say I'll have them in time for the next session. Going by his mouth I'm not sure I want them."

Paul, my pal, rubbed the three day growth on his jaw. "I would. I'm fed up with my warring couples. They'd be alright if they did some full-on arguing to keep me entertained, a bit of aggro for me to mp3 up and put on my site. But it's like pairs of... weakened puppies. Whinging and crying and looking at me like I'm eating a big steak. Or hoping I'll drown the other one in a lake."

"You're envious of my freaks?"

"I am. I've got freak envy."

"Pinhead envy," I said with mild triumph.

"Oh, Jesus. That's awful. That doesn't even work. That's worse than the time you said tree-nis envy to that botany student. This doesn't even work."

"There's pinheads in the film Freaks."

"There is a point to all of this I take it?"

"Yes, it's above their faces. I'm not talking about like what Americans call 'pinhead', like 'stupid'. I'm talking about actual named 'pinheads', like a human species. They've got tapered heads that go up to a point and they all require urgent dental care. And this isn't made up either, that's how they really are."

"In the film?"

"It's an old film and all the freaks are real life freaks."

He frowned and sipped. "I think I heard about that."

I nod. "They should come and film my one."

"In Dolby. For accurate reproduction of the string section in his gob. What's his name again?"

"Joe Raimi. 10am tomorrow. Another?"

I can normally do them with a hangover. I set the particularly needy ones, the unassertive ones, up with morning appointments. They're happy to go on

talking and I can drift off a bit. They've got quite low, quiet, soothing voices some of them. Although, within that subset, within that particular area of the Venn diagram, there are some you have to be very careful of. Careful you don't find yourself taking too much of it in. Really distressing shit about what their parents did to them and all that. Sometimes I have to get two large Jack Daniel's down me before I can even face my sandwich.

"Dr.?"

"Please continue talking about that. I want you to explore that emotion without too much input from me."

"It makes me feel..."

This one, Jenny, is pure gold. Instant karma. A voice like whale song but without having to explain all your good lifestyle choices and taste afterwards to counter balance the incredible mass you just placed on the other side of the scales. Her problems are currently with her husband. History of abusive relationships. She won't change. She needs a listening ear, though, to continue to function at the level of employee. Without me she'd probably lose her job. The government pays me to keep these borderline economic burdens in play. If only she knew what she had in her voice. If it went public address... people in bustling train stations struck motionless and serenely unaware of where or when to get their train, putting down their briefcases to use as a pillow on the concourse. I inhale deeply, eyes closed and am about to let out a satisfied sigh when my mobile silently spasms in my pocket - the alarm I set to indicate 'time up'.

"...and he said that if I ever spoke to him like that again he'd kill me *and* my

parents. So, I feel absolutely desperate like I might do something..."

"Hum... I'm afraid that's all the time we have for this week. I want you to use the focussing techniques we went through a few sessions ago and apply them to what we've gone through today. I'll see you next week."

Well trained, she gathers herself, her things and heads off. As the door closes her healing presence leaves too. I feel shut out, like a cat scratching at a door. The hangover kicks back in with a monotonous rolling beat. Ten minutes until Beethoven turns up.

I fantasise briefly about killing Morton, another doctor down the corridor, with a leather bootlace. I picture my masterful defence speech and I'm acquitted because every right thinking being on the planet understands that it was the only solution. I have a complete moral and psychological justification and everybody understands this. But it isn't helping the head ache.

The buzzer goes signalling the patient has arrived and my face stiffens into its routine neutrality. A face designed to instil a sense of security in the patient. Too stern and a patient will find it difficult to open up. This will mean I have to work very hard to reach the stage where the patient can monologue their hour away. Too happy and generous and a patient may tend to assume that I am not a serious professional. It may also lead to attempts to form a relationship beyond the doctor/ patient one.

Some notable headline makers have cultivated sexual desires in their patients and been rewarded with a varied sexual life. A paper recently appeared in *The Lobe* showing that 40 percent of male

practitioners struck off for 'really getting into the patient's head' eventually confessed their behaviour to their superiors. They said they did this to escape the incredibly complicated logistics of having extra-marital affairs with several people who, in themselves, are several people. "There were seven of us in my marriage," said one doctor's wife "and three of them were Mandy."

I am somewhat sceptical of The Lobe's findings because most patients are not nearly interesting enough to have multiple personalities. Most of them struggle to achieve *one*. Although, when I put this to Steve in the bar, he said "No, it's quite possible. Because if you're shot down in flames the first time, if you're persistent you've got a chance of getting off with one of the other personalities that's in there. They're over-represented precisely because there's so many of them - despite the fact that there are also very few." Lazily mulling this over isn't helping my headache.

And then he steps in. Joe Raimi. I catch his eye. His round wide eyes. This is a mistake I promised myself I wouldn't repeat. Like many people with deep, deep problems he has deep, deep eyes. The lids are large and heavy, puffed and bloated. The cumulative ballast from years of powerful and unwanted emotion. If you look into most people's eyes you either see an ugly absence or the monotonous easy focus, like a flashing cursor, of someone going about their work or habitual manoeuvres. The majority of people I see also have deeply ingrained habits but they are the habits of someone who has been living alone on a remote island. Still fighting World War II. They've lived, for a

year, entirely on a diet of Golden Nuggets. Or they have been kicked down the stairs by their husband every weekend for a decade and now throw themselves down them if he doesn't come home. They believe that the world will be sucked into a black hole if they do not accurately index their VHS tapes. They have a wank every time they see CCTV footage of a building society being turned over. And then, when they emerge into a world that doesn't understand their behaviour, they get scared. Their eyes open wide with a suspicion that the entire world knows what they do and that they think it is wrong and that they should be got rid of. The intense pain of being compelled to face a world that neither understands or cares brings tears to their eyes and confirms their belief that they are safest on their island. Anybody could be the enemy.

Wet, round, scared eyes. Beckoning mermaids that say "I'm letting you on my island. It is all I have. Please do not take it away from me." Well, frankly, fuck that - we've got an hour to try and kick you back into the economy. You might have been away a long time but pretend these shopping trolleys are like firewood. You go out and find and then bring them back here. See? No. No, don't set them on fire. Remote islands are for the rich. Only Randolph Hearst could afford to be Randolph Hirst. No man is an island until he can put down the deposit.

Fifteen minutes later, after I explain that the photographs have still not arrived but without asking him to do so; he undresses before me. Jesus. Where has he been?

END OF PART ONE

The Great McGonagall Spike Milligan's Lost Masterpiece

By Matthew Coniam and Richard Larcombe

On Monday 24th June, 2002, the *London Evening Standard* reported on the memorial service held that day in London in honour of a humourist and writer often cited as the most important British comedian of the twentieth century, Spike Milligan.

By an interesting coincidence, a few pages later in the same edition a much smaller piece reported on another ceremony held the same day in Dundee. Here, a walkway had been unveiled in memory of a nineteenth-century Scottish writer often cited as the worst poet of all time, William McGonagall.

Nobody would have been more delighted than Milligan himself by this symbolic joining in death of his name with that of the ill-fated Scottish weaver turned 'poet and tragedian'. For McGonagall's life and verse had long been an obsession of Milligan's, finding frequent (and frequently irrelevant) expression in his published works, as well as taking centre stage in two full-length novels and one remarkable film. This is the story of that film.

With a body of work as generally undiscussed, misrepresented and rarely seen as Milligan's, it may seem perverse to label *The Great McGonagall* (1974) as his 'lost masterpiece'. After all, what is the *Q* series if not a masterpiece and (thanks to BBC neglect) to all intents and purposes lost? *McGonagall*, however, is buried treasure even by Milligan standards: little seen, both on release and subsequently, it is usually subject to critical derision when not ignored altogether. Financed by producers who envisaged it largely as a tax-dodge it received only a token release, and until we contacted them, even two of its principal stars, John Bluthal and Victor Spinetti, had never seen it.

Most contemporary reviews were negative. When it is mentioned today, it tends to be as a footnote in studies of Peter Sellers, who contributes a cameo appearance as Queen Victoria. Often it is cited as yet another disastrous Sellers project from the era of *Where Does It Hurt?* and *The Ghost in the Noonday Sun*, or worse: as a failed off-shoot of the Goons. Certainly, Sellers's prominence in the credits (and in the film's minimal promotion) can be seen as a deliberate, perhaps backfiring, attempt to lure audiences to the film. (Bluthal "just

couldn't believe how much Spike was in awe of Peter.") This has resulted in most reviewers writing about Sellers's few minutes of screen-time and little else. *Variety's* scribe goes so far as to claim that Sellers's scenes ("as a randy monarch") are "chopped up and distributed haphazardly throughout the pic in a vain attempt to keep interest from flagging." (In fact, he appears in two distinct, un-chopped up sequences.) This is wrong, and lazy, and has helped obscure for over twenty-five years the fact that *The Great McGonagall* is one of the strangest, most genuinely unique and fascinating British films ever made.

Though a representative (if extreme) example of Milligan's mature comic style (made shortly before *Q6* and distinguished from *The Goon Show* by its more uncompromising sense of iconoclastic absurdism) the film is at the same time distinct from his surrounding.



At this point it may be useful to digress briefly and confirm exactly what we mean when we talk of Milligan's mature style, since even this fundamental matter has, surprisingly, received virtually no serious critical analysis. We all know how the Goons revolutionised British comedy with their healthily irreverent childishness, absurd sound effects and funny noises, but how often are we told that Milligan *progressed* from this template, producing comedy through the sixties and seventies that was deeper, denser, further refined, cleverer, stranger, more intense, better and significantly different?

In a revealing (mid-eighties) interview (for the television programme *Famous Last Words*),

Milligan claimed that he had to reign-in his comic imagination to suit the specific market he was catering to and that "when I really write comedy nobody understands it, it's like *Finnegan's Wake*."

Re-listening to the Goons it is clear that what seemed daringly anarchic at the time is in fact Milligan at one-tenth force, and riddled with retained radio comedy conventions. All would gradually be dispensed with in the years that followed, and in his subsequent work in theatre (notably *Son of Oblomov*), television (notably the sublime *Q6*, *7* and *8*) and this one film we see the natural evolution of a comic style defined above all else by its restlessness and inability to adhere statically to formalised conventions. (Even, that is, when those conventions were formalised by Milligan himself, and about as far from both formality and conventionality as can be imagined.) Compare any episode of *Q8* with *The Goon Show* (or for that matter with *Monty Python's Flying Circus*) and you will instantly concede Milligan's point about the sheer idiosyncratic *depth* of his comic imagination. But if what you're after is the full *Finnegan's Wake*, you really need *The Great McGonagall*; the only 'pure' example of Milligan cinema in existence. He is properly dominant and at liberty, neither pocketed into cameos and guest spots nor straitjacketed by the demands of conventional narrative and characterisation as in, for example, *Postman's Knock* (1961), a bona-fide star vehicle with nothing to offer Milligan devotees whatsoever. Goon Show fans may be able to extract a smile or two from *Down Among The Z-Men* (1952), but *Q*-lovers in search of bizarre visual ideas, wild mangling of everyday English, characters in blackface, tailor's dummies, boxing gloves, cornflake-box crowns and people dressed as Hitler have only one option.

The idea for the film came from its director Joe McGrath, one of the most significant creative figures in post-war British comedy, whose work as writer, producer and director encompasses *Not Only But Also*, *The Bliss of Mrs Blossom* (1968), bits of the notorious *Casino Royale* (1967), Sellers's best film *The Magic Christian* (1969), the sweet Dudley Moore vehicle *Thirty Is A Dangerous Age, Cynthia* (1968) and Morecambe and Wise's peculiar swansong *Night Train To Murder* (1985).

Like Milligan and Sellers, McGrath was (and is) a huge fan of McGonagall, whose contrived rhymes and inability to adhere to even the simplest conventions of rhythm and scansion lends his work a comic effect so pronounced that it is easy to forget that the poet's intentions were always deadly serious. The three would regularly meet at the Dorchester on McGonagall's birthday for a celebration incorporating grandiose recitations of his work, and McGrath recalls that, while Milligan would doggedly continue to a poem's conclusion, Sellers would invariably surrender to hysterical laughter part-way through (a telling example of the important differences between the two men).

McGonagall was not just a figure of fun to Milligan. However hilarious he found his 'poetic gems' there can be no doubt that Milligan was as much fascinated and moved by the story

of the poet's life as he was amused by what John Bluthal termed his "terrible, crap, twelfth-grade poetry". McGrath has confirmed that the film's interpretation of this rather pathetic historical figure is in large measure a Milligan self-portrait, and more broadly that the latter's obsession with McGonagall is a reflection of a deep and sincere empathy with an eccentric creative talent who pursued his personal vision in the face of both apathy and antipathy.

McGonagall was an extraordinary individual who, struck by the muse at the age of 52, abruptly gave up his job to devote himself to an art at which he had not the vaguest talent but with which he persevered in the face of insult, mockery and even parody. His public recitations of his works invariably ended with his being pelted with rotten eggs, and often he would secure a spot on theatre bills by paying the owner. (He was also notorious for his performances from Shakespearean tragedies, including a celebrated *Macbeth*, recreated in the film with Milligan's customary self-defeating refusal to stick to the point.)

His decision to persevere, and to interpret this constant rejection as jealousy or ignorance rather than an honest verdict on verse that was clearly inept, is almost impossible to understand. And it is these pretensions that continually undermine the essential tragedy of his story. There is both sadness and pomposity, for instance, in the manner in which he courted the approval of the aristocracy and other writers. Broadsheet versions of some of his poems proclaim him *Patronised by Her Majesty and Lord Wolseley of Cairo, HRH the Duke of Cambridge, the Right Hon W E Gladstone and General Graham; also the nobility and gentry etc*, before going on to reproduce form replies to unsolicited poems as if they were official praise from their intended recipients. One is headed *Copy Of Letter From The Right Hon W E Gladstone* and reads simply: *'Mr Gladstone desires me to acknowledge with thanks the receipt of the two poems which you kindly sent him. Your obedient servant, George Spence Littleton.'* In perhaps his most celebrated gesture of self-delusion he journeyed by foot to Balmoral to read his works to the Queen, only to be turned away at the gates.

Yet despite the steep difference in their levels of acclaim and neglect (and talent, of course) it is not hard to see parallels between the two men in their sense of themselves, and their single-mindedness in the face of disinterest and misunderstanding. Despite his high critical reputation and generally favourable standing with the public, Milligan tended always to emphasise the disappointments and frustrations of his career; for instance in his failure to achieve true international recognition and his perceived ill-treatment by the BBC. It seems clear that he saw in McGonagall a fellow-sufferer, condemned to his personal and uncompromising form of creative expression, a man ahead of his time, and, most of all, a supreme individual.

It was his first attempt in over twenty years as a professional writer to tell a true story other than his own. In previous work, a slender and ultimately disposable plot would be

used as context for a range of obsessions, diversions and whims, always subservient to his almost obsessive need to stray from the narrative path and pursue peculiar tangents, often at dominating length. In his West End success *Son of Oblomov* he had found success by radically departing from the original script and thus asserting the ultimate irrelevance of plot. Here, however, he has a definite story to tell, and which he *wants* to tell, and the resultant conflict between his narrative and comic instincts is central to the effect of the film.

Still, the best way to appreciate the film is in the light of Milligan's more ambitious post-*Goon Show* projects in the theatre. In the early sixties, in collaboration with playwright John Antrobus, he had written *The Bed-Sitting Room*, a broadly satirical stage success in which techniques developed in light entertainment were applied to the creation of a vibrant British form of absurdist theatre. The play also introduced many elements of Milligan's visual vocabulary, in particular the false noses, signs, ragged costumes, scattered props and portable doors that would inform the look of *Q*.

By the time he triumphed again in *Son of Oblomov* no less a figure than Peter Brook was writing (in his 1968 book *The Empty Space*) of "Spike Milligan's theatre, in which the imagination flies like a wild bat in and out of every possible shape and style", before summing-up his work as "a pointer to what may become a powerful English tradition." The wild bats were also circling over Allen Eyles, whose contemporaneous *The Marx Brothers: Their World of Comedy* nominates Milligan as the only fitting heir to their theatrical kingdom. For Spike, one imagines, there could be no higher praise.

Indeed, this sense that his comedy was essentially theatrical never left Milligan. It permeates *Q*, in which Milligan frequently makes asides and in-jokes not to the watching tv audience but to the audience in the studio ("those free tickets paid off"). And it reaches its apotheosis in *McGonagall*, a film best understood as an extension of these theatrical endeavours. (*Cinema/TV Today's* Marjorie Bilbow observed, in what could well be the only positive review the film received, that it will appeal to "the sizeable minority that is switched on to the now-you-get-it-now-you-don't comedy of the absurd", adding that it should do best at cinemas "in the vicinity of universities".)

So, when embarking on the film, Milligan could look back on a career that had seemingly been most successful when he had been most free to do as he wished. From *The Goon Show*, which apparently greatly vexed the BBC hierarchy of the time, to his irreverent deconstructions of theatrical convention, his wildest inventions had been met with acclaim and success. It would seem he genuinely believed that *McGonagall* would establish him in cinema as *Oblomov* had on stage, and the double blow of its cynically limited release and critical dismissal was something he was never able to come to terms with. McGrath has confirmed that, while Sellers was philosophical about the inevitable reception the film received, Milligan was angry and saddened, and convinced to the last that its day would come.

As noted above, the idea and indeed the first-draft screenplay were McGrath's. It was based on the short account of McGonagall's life included as an introduction to *Poetic Gems*, and while much of the text of the film is derived verbatim from contemporary record, the finished film – with Milligan's script input – significantly departs from fact at every stage. This, combined with the armoury of complex visual and textual distractions characteristic of Milligan's style make the film a somewhat bewildering experience on a first viewing. As Bilbow observed, "the profusion of throwaway lines and visual jokes require more than one viewing if the full flavour is to be savoured." On a second viewing, she continues: "The improvement is startling: I not only heard more. I also saw more, which happens when you know what is coming and can afford to let your eyes wander. The pathos also comes over more clearly – and for the same reason."

First time round, viewers will discover that, whatever else it may be, this is not a film for people who like to know what is going on, or to understand what all the jokes mean. Similarly, viewers drawn to the film by an enthusiasm for the subject will soon find themselves in unfamiliar territory. Nigel Gearing in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* bases his conclusion that it is "one of the most embarrassingly unfunny films ever to see the light of day" at least in part on "the difficulty of catching more than the odd line of McGonagall verse".

It is true that the film seems perversely determined to deny its viewers the chance to understand what McGonagall actually *did*. The film's first poem is not recognisable as such, since it is delivered without intonation as a monologue, others are rendered inaudible by background noise and echoey recording, still more are distorted by being set to music or simply by the erratic rhythms of Milligan's stylised delivery. In the film's central Queen Victoria fantasy sequence, Sellers and Milligan join in a recitation of *An Address To The New Tay Bridge*, McGonagall's most famous poem, and one that obsessed Milligan so much he even managed to smuggle its entirety into the first few pages of his book *Frankenstein According To Spike Milligan*. It should be the film's key illustration of McGonagall the poet, but the film opts to distract us from it by cutting between the pair and shots of Prince Albert (Julian Chagrin) operating a steam-driven theatre-organ which projects a series of 'What the Butler Saw'-style soft-porn photographs and captions. The poem's delivery is as usual mannered to a degree approaching incomprehensibility, and the confusion accentuated by the acoustic unsuitability of the location, the accompaniment of a piercing hammond organ arrangement of 'Amazing Grace', and the urgent sound of steam machinery.

This cavalier treatment of the works is explained by the fact that McGrath, Milligan and Sellers had been enjoying reading them to each other for years, and it simply never occurs to Milligan that audiences may not instantly know what he is saying or why. Similarly, his habit of preceding readings with a guttural cry of "ooooooooooooohhhhhhh!" is used as a source of humour (forgetting to write it at the start of a poem, serving as a cue for

characters to run away, etc) long before the audience has a chance to recognise it as a recurring convention. With Milligan you have to work hard for your entertainment, and if you can't keep up you come away confused and annoyed.

Another feature of Milligan's work that can cause difficulties for modern audiences is his characteristically ambiguous yet obsessive use of racial humour. But this is never a simple matter, and it is notable that the Jamaican actor Clifton Jones is never made the subject of any explicit racial jokes. The closest Milligan comes to using Jones in this way is at the end of the film, when he appears as King Theebaw, described by McGonagall as "a genuine chinky-poo king", a lovely line disarmed of any trace of malice by its hopeless (and deliberate) confusing of racial terms. Spinetti's British officer in the Zulu sequence calls for a letter-bearer with the simple cry of "Nigger!", but not only is this historically valid, the call is answered not by Jones but by Valentine Dyll blacked-up only from the neck upwards. (Jones later plays a fop in whiteface.)

This will be no surprise to students of Milligan, and particularly of *Q*, where humour is extracted not lazily from the meaningless pointing-out of racial differences but from the artificiality of the stereotypes themselves. In one sketch, for example, Keith Smith appears in Scots Guard uniform and minstrel make-up (as 'Private Shand'). "What's the matter", asks Milligan, "couldn't you find the soap?" Addressed to a black man this would be a logical, albeit offensive, joke. Addressed to a white actor playing a soldier made up for no reason as a minstrel it is meaningless, harmless, hilarious and quintessential Milligan.

The film's theatrical style and subject are perfectly complemented by McGrath and Milligan's audacious decision to shoot the entire production within the walls of one building.

Wilton's Music Hall, situated in a narrow alley a short walk from Tower Bridge, was one of the first and most popular music halls in London. It closed in 1885 and after use as a mission and then a rag warehouse it was abandoned and left empty and decaying. A campaign in 1964 saved it from demolition, but by that time it had fallen into serious disrepair, and ten years later remained derelict and facing an uncertain future. It is hard to imagine this crumbling, dirty (and surprisingly small) building proving adequate as a feature film location at all, yet Milligan and McGrath decided to shoot every scene there, with the stage, wings, stalls and corridors doubling as Dundee's Theatre Royal, pubs, courtrooms, prison cells, schools, Balmoral and (a deliberately artificial) Africa. It was a decision to which a large part of the film's unique and puzzling atmosphere can be attributed.

In one incredibly beautiful sequence a simple corridor is used as a seedy back-alley and is at once poetically 'unrealistic' and yet totally convincing, due almost solely to the economical but expert use of backlighting and a little dripping water. In reality, this

corridor looks nothing like a street and everything like a corridor.

Similarly, the drab, crumbling walls of McGonagall's house are really the drab, crumbling walls of the once-renowned 'Mahogany Bar', just inside the theatre's main doors. The despairing claustrophobia of this convincingly created Victorian hovel is emphasised by occasional glimpses out of the 'front door' into a street even more tightly enclosed than the poet's house. It is in fact a narrow backstage corridor: the set dressing, lighting and photography are truly masterful.

Needless to say, the building did not present ideal conditions for a film crew.

JOE MCGRATH: It was like living in a slum. We got there every morning at about eight o'clock and we were there until about ten o'clock at night some nights. The place was rat-infested. There were rats actually there. Very funny. I said "Are we paying for this location?"

The location also posed technical problems. McGrath remembers "no electricity, just a sort of small fusebox, so we had to bring a generator", resulting in the decision to augment the minimal lighting with atmospheric candlelight in most scenes. ("It looks gloomy but then we meant it to look gloomy... we definitely wanted it to look the way it does", McGrath explains. Indeed, cinematographer John Mackey's approach to lighting the film was the subject of a lecture he gave to the British Society of Cameramen shortly after the its release.)

As with so much of the film, this is an example of an act of necessity proving inspirational. The film begins with a caption suggesting that, from the moment he determined to become a poet, McGonagall was "onstage for the rest of his life", a neat metaphor that explains (or rationalises) the restricted setting at a stroke. If, as McGrath insists, the metaphor came first and the location was sought to match it, the finding of Wilton's must rate as one of the greatest strokes of good fortune in cinema history. (It is one of many elements of the film that give it an almost art-house feel, a view shared by the novelist Jonathan Coe in a letter of appreciation to McGrath and by Milligan's co-star John Bluthal, who told us: "It's sort of a film for the art world... I don't think a general audience would go for it because it's way out.")

The initial contact with Wilton's was probably Milligan's. In 1970 he (and Sellers) had appeared in *Wilton's – The Handsomest Hall In Town*, a recreation for BBC television of a typical night's entertainment. Milligan had visited the theatre in his capacity as champion of conservation and persuaded BBC Head of Comedy Michael Mills to finance the programme, with the cast accepting a fee of only fifty pounds each so that the surplus could be spent on helping to restore the building. Major structural repairs had been undertaken two years previously by Universal who had filmed part of *Isadora* (1968) there, and the BBC then



restored much of the interior's original gold and deep red décor. It was still technically derelict when McGrath and Milligan began filming, however, as frequent glimpses of peeling paint, bare wooden floors and crumbling brickwork amply testify.

After making the BBC programme Milligan and Mills were involved in the establishing of a trust to maintain Wilton's, and such was Milligan's love of the building that McGrath recalls him sleeping there overnight

on occasions during *McGonagall's* three-week shoot. (McGrath also remembers him spending a night in a sleeping bag in the middle of a field of cows during the filming of *Digby, The Biggest Dog In The World.*)

On repeated viewings, the true nature of the surroundings becomes apparent, recalling the deliberately underdressed sets that were such a trademark of *Q*. But to McGrath's credit this is far from obvious on one's first encounter with the film. The use of only three different spaces for virtually the entire production is constantly inventive, and lends the film an almost eerily authentic period atmosphere, as if a condemned Victorian theatre has been prised open to reveal a condemned Victorian world still operating within.

VICTOR SPINETTI: It has a tremendously Victorian feel. If you thought of the crumbling Empire and all the rest of it, it caught it absolutely. It came across as if it could have been filmed in Victorian times. To me it looks like a film found in the archives... shot in a theatre with these actors doing a tribute to a Victorian poet. That's exactly what we did.

The theatrical atmosphere was further underlined by the decision to use the cast in multiple roles, giving the film the feel of an amateur stage production. (The spontaneity and ensemble style reminded Spinetti of his work at Stratford East with Joan Littlewood's company, particularly *Oh, What A Lovely War!*) We are introduced to the cast in the title sequence, which shows each in turn being made-up in one of the theatre's dressing rooms. (Ever vigilant against the notion of a moment making too much sense, Milligan is shown being made up (by Sellers) with a gag in his mouth, a Hitler moustache and his hands tied behind his back.)

MCGRATH: My idea was: it's a group of actors just getting together to make a film on McGonagall... In the opening titles they're getting made up, and you can see the extras all come in and sit down. You can hear me direct them and say "Action".

The undisguised use of the theatre stage for the more outre settings, such as Balmoral, which is identified by a large postcard-style backdrop reading 'Welcome To Balmoral', and Africa, identified by the simple expedient of having the location and date written on a board stage-left, brings this sense of theatricality to the fore. The script makes this two-level approach far clearer than the film itself, showing that the locations are intended to simultaneously represent both the narrative location and the theatre in which they are filmed, and the cast (as Spinetti recalled) playing both characters and actors. Thus Milligan is at once McGonagall and himself. It is also why the Zulu scene features shots of the enemy advancing through a seated audience watching the drama unfolding on the stage, and why (in one of the most confusing moments of the film) the beaten and robbed McGonagall mysteriously relocates from a seedy tavern to the theatre stalls. (Thrown to the ground he is asked where he has come from and replies "The gallery".)

The sense that the film generates of being the work of a troupe of players putting on a show is therefore quite deliberately contrived. Of the film's nine speaking players, only three - Milligan as McGonagall, Sellers as Queen Victoria and Julia Foster (a popular film and tv actress of the time) in an entirely straight performance as McGonagall's wife - play a single role. Virtually all of the remaining cast members had previously worked with McGrath, Milligan or both, creating a palpably friendly rep-like atmosphere. These include dwarf actor and frequent Milligan co-star Charlie Atom, Clifton Jones (a replacement for the originally-cast Ray Ellington, famous as regular musical guest on *The Goon Show*) and Julian Chagrin. Chagrin, a noted mime artist (and one of the tennis-players in Antonioni's *Blow Up*) had appeared in McGrath's *Thirty Is A Dangerous Age*, *Cynthia* and, the year before McGonagall, in Milligan's tv programme *The Last Turkey In The Shop*. (He was also the 'secret lemonade drinker' in the famous tv commercial directed by McGrath.)

Completing the cast are John Bluthal, Victor Spinetti and Valentine Dyall. Dyall, a tall, distinguished and sepulchral actor famous as radio's 'Man In Black', was a frequent comic target of *The Goon Show*, one of Peter Sellers's celebrated range of impersonations, who got the joke and became a guest star and later appeared in the stage version of *The Bed Sitting Room*. Very much the actor-laddie in manner if not in status, McGrath recalls Milligan christening him 'Borrowing Valentine Dyall' on account of his regular requests for small loans.

Spinetti, a popular Welsh comic actor with a career broad enough to embrace a co-starring role in Sid James's 1969 sitcom *Two In Clover*, an eccentric turn in Anthony Newley's unclassifiable *Can Hieronymous Merkin Ever Forget Mercy Humpe and Find True Happiness?* the same year and a notable guest appearance in *Bottom* (third series, 1995)

had previously worked with Bluthal in *Help!* (1965) and McGrath and Milligan in *Digby, the Biggest Dog in the World* (1973). Spinetti contributes some of the best and best-judged acting work to the film. He was a late replacement for McGrath's first choice Milo O'Shea from a shortlist of candidates that included Henry Magee and Eric Idle.

John Bluthal, who in his own words had "done a lot of work with Joe and almost everything with Spike", is one of the greatest yet most unsung figures in British comedy. A truly superb performer, he is almost as important a factor in the brilliance of *Q* as Milligan



himself, with an unrivalled ability to match Milligan's on-set improvisations and keep up with his sudden leaps of inspiration. He is also a splendidly eccentric impressionist, whose heightened versions of Hughie Green and Huw Weldon are so amusing they became recurring characters in *Q*. (In *McGonagall* he bases one character on the Irish stage actor Micheal MacLiammoir, whom he had already impersonated in *The Bliss of Mrs Blossom* and who had himself appeared in *Thirty Is A Dangerous Age,*

Cynthia.) Rewatching their scenes together in *McGonagall* and *Q*, it is impossible to agree with Bluthal's assertion that he shines in Milligan's presence "purely because he used me well". On the contrary, it is because each brings something to the piece that the other lacks that their work together is of such a high standard. The best moments of *Q* are those in which Milligan's reckless clowning is set against Bluthal's measured comic acting: he is the perfect partner for Milligan, the best supporting player he ever had, and his performances combine precision, flexibility and a warmly conveyed admiration for the material and its author.

All aspects of the theatrical atmosphere for which the film strives – the ensemble playing, the artificiality and the inability to disguise or repair accidental errors – come together most strikingly in what plays as the film's most enigmatic scene. This is the moment in which a fairly complicated plot-led sequence (in which McGonagall is being deceived into thinking that the Queen has invited him to Balmoral) suddenly breaks down into confusion, with McGrath appearing on screen to supervise retakes, then calling lunch.

What ostensibly grinds the scene to a halt is Milligan's inability to remember, or seemingly to understand, a punchline he is obliged to deliver. Unfortunately this simple reading of the scene is confounded by the fact that the joke in question is so obvious, and so typical of the man failing to deliver it. Victor Spinetti, arranging the spurious appointment with Victoria, says: "Shall we say Balmoral Castle, next Thursday at four pm?" whereupon Milligan is supposed to do just that (say 'Balmoral Castle, next Thursday at four pm'). Instead, he stops the performance to inquire of McGrath what it is he is supposed to say. There follows a series of attempts to complete the sequence, with Spinetti giggling and enjoying the confusion, McGrath plainly eager to finish the scene in one take and Milligan, in no mood for levity whatsoever, grumbling that his performance was "over the top" and that he wants to start again. It is as if he is trying deliberately to spoil a take (by

pretending to be confused by an obvious joke) so as to force a reshoot of a scene he was not happy with. (This, according to McGrath, was a tactic often employed by Peter Sellers.) When the line is finally (and reticently) delivered, McGrath calls lunch with the scene still incomplete, whereupon we watch the cast eating outside the building next to a shabby caravan, while a lush song on the soundtrack ironically praises the magic of *'Showbiz'*.

The mysteriousness of the scene is compounded by the fact that McGrath, Bluthal and Spinetti all remember it differently. McGrath recalls it as typical Milligan high spirits:

MCGRATH: That just happened by accident because Spike on the take actually said "I think we should go to lunch" and I said "Okay, lunch!" and... we went to lunch and then all came back in and started again. And Spike loves things like that. He hated the discipline of big films. So did Sellers.

But it is McGrath, not Milligan, who calls lunch, and Bluthal accordingly sees the scene as typical of McGrath's approach to the discipline of film-making:

JOHN BLUTHAL: He's a very good director, he did some very good films... He was very serious with his work, but of course very funny. I mean, that scene when he said "Oh, it's alright, love, let's do it again": that was just totally Joe! It was part of that aura of theatricalism that Joe loves. I don't think he was ever an actor but he loves actors. He loves the business of saying "alright, darling, don't worry, we'll do it again – okay, lunch now!"

What both versions cannot explain is why Milligan appears to be in such low spirits. This is acknowledged by Victor Spinetti:

SPINETTI: It started truthfully: "*What do I say next?*"... And then he just kept doing it – typical Spike. He's brilliant because you don't know whether he was (putting it on) or not. But he was really getting more and more incensed and more and more angry. He knew what he was saying. It started off that he really did dry, and then I think we just kept going.

Which reading is correct? The matter was only solved by the timely location of McGrath's original shooting script, heavily annotated on-set by Milligan and himself. This reveals, amazingly, that the entire episode was planned, and is acted. It deviates substantially from the original text (in which the director's voice was to be heard off-screen asking Milligan to repeat the line more clearly) but nonetheless shows that the film was intended to break down on that specific line, and that its completion should then result in the actors going to lunch. (In this original version, rather than a song, the lunch scene was to be accompanied by the actors talking as themselves.)

This revelation at once clears up a mystery and creates several new ones. Why did neither McGrath, Spinetti nor Bluthal, all raising the subject themselves and fresh from a viewing of

the film, remember it as spurious? Why is Milligan opting to appear truculent rather than enjoying a good corpsing session (a regular feature of *Q*)? And most of all, capable players though all present so undoubtedly are, how was such an extraordinary level of authenticity achieved? There is something so genuine about the behaviour of everybody present, not just the skilled professional actors like Bluthal and Spinetti, but also Milligan and McGrath, who speak in fractured, spontaneous sentences with incredible believability. Is it possible that this moment was a private decision of Milligan's and McGrath's, not included in the other cast members' scripts? This would explain the convincing attitudes of Bluthal, Spinetti and Julia Foster (who can be heard trying to assist Milligan out of shot), and also the actors' inability to remember the moment as faked. But it still would not account for the amazing verisimilitude of McGrath and Milligan themselves. Whatever the ultimate truth, this compelling sequence remains bizarre, fascinating and (like so much else in the film) way ahead of its time.

The sense of theatre is evoked most deliberately in the film's frequent use of theatre and music hall settings within the narrative. McGrath was a music hall devotee, as was Milligan (though the latter's treatment of it in his work was often savagely parodic, in keeping with his treatment of virtually everything). It is interesting to note that McGrath's Morecambe and Wise film *Night Train To Murder* is set against a backdrop of forties variety theatres and is suffused with references to Flanagan and Allen and old music hall songs, jokes and routines. Bluthal, too, was a huge music hall fan. Indeed, in the scene in which he portrays music hall artiste 'Hercules Faint', performing a splendid satirical song written by McGrath (McGrath: "Lionel Bart had promised to write us a song but of course he was pissed so I had to write one almost on the day"), Bluthal himself suggested that he sing it dressed as G.H. Chirgwin 'the One-eyed Kaffir', in a minstrel make-up distinguished by a peculiar white diamond around one eye.

BLUTHAL: When I first came to England I was nineteen and I went to pubs and I heard all the songs that were sung by George Robey, Vesta Tilley, Vesta Victoria, Harry Champion... I took a lot of stuff with me to Australia and I produced, directed and starred in a series on tv called *Gaslight Music Hall*... I loved all these great comedians... So Joe knew that, Spike knew it, so when the thing came up I said "Can I come on as Chirgwin, blacked up with a square diamond over my eye?" And that was that!

This intricate layer of homage, at most peripheral to the story of McGonagall, adds the final layer of theatrical artifice to this least cinematic of films and shows it clearly to be a labour of love by all concerned. Alas, however, Milligan's and McGrath's ambitions were not matched by those of the film's financiers, who saw the film in rather more modest terms: as a tax write-off, hence its virtual non-release.

The film was produced by Tigon, in the few short months of the company's existence after it had passed out of the hands of its charismatic founder Tony Tenser, a shrewd producer

who knew a commercial property when he saw one and would never have touched *McGonagall* with a ten-foot pole.

MCGRATH: The money came about through Tigon: an Indian accountant called (Kamal) Pasha, and Laurie Marshall who owned a whole group of cinemas at that time. He owned the cinema in the city where the film was premiered... Tigon Distributors gave us the money, but we were lumbered by them because they had put money into a system called Multivista... they had bought a load of Mitchell sound cameras and they said they would let us make the film if we made it on Multivista.

This was a process rather like tv taping, in which up to five cameras were used simultaneously. It had the advantage of saving time on multiple coverage of single scenes, but the severe compensating disadvantage of the constant risk of one camera filming another. Distinguished therefore by staccato tv-style cuts rather than graceful camera movement, the system was hardly used (though Ray Cooney, who used it to direct *Not Now, Darling* (1972) loved it, telling us: "It was terrific; we did tremendous long takes which is so useful for keeping the energy going, so I couldn't have been happier.") But for a less formal creative imagination like McGrath's it proved an unworkable nightmare, albeit one with a very simple solution:

MCGRATH: When we got there I just refused to use it, and we shot it all on one camera. I occasionally used two, when I wanted to get a close-up of Spike and didn't want to do it too many times because he hates repeating things, then I used a wide-shot and a very tight close-up on Spike. But basically it's shot on one camera.

This act of mutiny was never discovered, and the credits proudly claim that the film was shot in Multivista. Pasha and Marshall had hired McGrath and Milligan on the strength of their reputations and, further pacified by the presence of Sellers, had simply let them do whatever they wanted, however they wanted to do it. Apparently, there was never any doubt as to what the subject of the film would be.

MCGRATH: Spike and I had wanted to do something about *McGonagall* for years... I had a basic outline – sixty, seventy pages – and Spike read it and said "yeah, I'd like to do a film". Then he and I did three weeks on it, together, every day in his office at Orme Court. And Peter Sellers came in a couple of days as well.

McGrath insists that the film was tightly scripted and that little of what can be seen in the film was not carefully prepared beforehand. The actors, however, recall much typically Milliganesque on-set improvisation.

BLUTHAL: Obviously there was a script there, but knowing the script was not totally defined, a hell of a lot of stuff came off the floor... we'd throw in things, we'd suggest

things, he (McGrath) would say 'yes' or 'no'... and we enjoyed it... There were a lot of in-jokes, a lot of theatrical jokes, there's a bit of smut here and there.

Spinetti remembered the process as "very spontaneous", adding: "there was a script, but whatever took place was used if it turned up." In particular, he recalled one scene (the first) in which he plays a political agitator in a theatre; an ambitious sequence which features a live horse in the theatre stalls. ("We got a real horse and it shit everywhere", McGrath remembers.)

SPINETTI: That agitator was all ad-libbed. Johnny Bluthal was going to play it. In fact he wanted to play everything!.. They suddenly said (to me): "You've got to do it", and so they chucked me up there and said "Go on – agitate!" So that was that!

An examination of the shooting script reveals that, though the basic structure of the film was firmly in place before production, huge numbers of jokes and visual ideas were thought up on set and in rehearsal. Though only the Queen Victoria scene was officially rewritten after the first complete draft (appearing in the script on coloured paper) there is hardly a single page not heavily annotated (by both authors) with new jokes, and ideas.

The question of how free the actors were to depart from the script is important because Milligan is a performer who seems to thrive on chaos and find most inspiration when furthest from whatever it is he is supposed to be doing. But in this film – a rare and thus significant example of him performing at his freest but without the reassurance of a studio audience – his performance veers from his most uncontrollable style to moments of quiet, genuinely affecting pathos. Spinetti points out that on occasions he is almost "like the straight man in the film", while Marjorie Bilbow observed that "In the midst of the slapstick and mickey-taking, Spike Milligan gives a consistent and moving performance". McGrath recalls this sincere commitment to the subject on Milligan's part, and a sense of mission as far as the project is concerned that on one occasion memorably flared into violence:

MCGRATH: Milligan was very disciplined if he trusted you and you trusted him and he was enjoying himself. Very disciplined, always there ready to work, you know? In fact, he had a great argument with the electrician. (During the filming of a scene) it came to half past five and one of the electricians literally pulled the plug out, and Spike just went for him. He really tried to punch him and they had to separate them. I was on Spike's side and so was the cameraman: (he said) "What the hell are you doing? In the middle of a take!" He was removed and we had great trouble with the electricians' union, but he didn't come back to the film... He pulled the plug and it all went dark. John Mackey said "I like it better!"

McGonagall's life story as told by the film is as follows. After discovering a deep love for Queen Victoria and what he believes to be a genius for poetry, McGonagall leaves his job and is promptly imprisoned for being unable to pay his rent. On release he takes the lead

in amateur performance of scenes from Macbeth, staged at his own expense, and receives a sarcastic ovation he misreads as genuine. Gentlemen posing as admirers, one pretending to be John Brown, fool McGonagall into believing that the Queen is so impressed with his work she has invited him to tea at Balmoral. He dreams of being enthusiastically received, but in reality the exhausting walk is concluded by his being abruptly turned away at the gates. Mockery continues to dog him until, on the brink of death following a brutal beating, he receives official recognition of his talent, and dies happy.



The facts of McGonagall's life are adapted very freely, and the film has that much in common with Milligan's two novels on the subject (co-written with Jack Hobbs): *William McGonagall: The Truth At Last* and *William McGonagall Meets George Gershwin*. These books take the poet to India, Paris and Finsbury Park, introduce him to Gandhi, Churchill and Gunga Din and mix without indication real McGonagall poems with Milligan's own invented ones. The film's intentions are very different, and with McGrath's original treatment as a basis it bears a far closer proximity to reality.

MCGRATH: We decided that the centrepiece of the film should be his visit to Queen Victoria, because the truth of it is he walked the whole way, about eighty miles... We said 'Well that's bad enough, so we'll do that, but then we'll give him a fantasy that he actually met the Queen', and that's how Sellers came into it.

Many of the alterations have been made in the interests of narrative economy. McGonagall's performance as Macbeth leads directly to his journey to Balmoral, and subsequent events are placed in a sequence that allows the humiliation of the central character to build until his apparent resurrection. McGrath was no doubt the chief architect of this: a careful sense of structure is not a feature of Milligan's work as a rule, and this is one of the many ways in which the film benefits from their collaboration. Some of the departures from fact, however, seem quite inexplicable, and their purpose can only be to deliberately baffle and disorientate the viewer.

The opening, in which the cast carry McGonagall's coffin out of Wilton's front doors, concludes with Milligan telling us in voiceover that the story starts "here, at the Theatre Royal, Dundee." (An accompanying caption dates the scene as 1890, though it precedes the Balmoral journey of 1878.) This confers utterly misleading narrative weight on the ensuing scene, which is entirely invented and so confusing as to be of hardly the vaguest expository value.

During a political disturbance in the theatre, McGonagall foils an assassination attempt on the Queen: an event derived not from fact but from one of the poet's lesser-known gems, as the film never bothers to make clear. The fact that McGonagall follows this act of heroism with an onstage Max Miller impression, and that the Queen is so impressed with this that

she sends a dwarf postman to his house to put a custard pie in his face, gives some idea of the kind of demands made of the viewer within ten minutes of the film's beginning.

Much of this obtuseness is explained by a consultation of the original script. As well as revealing that the film is itself intended to be a theatrical performance by actors, it makes clear the odd leaps in chronology through the regular use of a voice-over narrator (intended to be John Bluthal imitating Bob Danvers Walker). Almost all of this explanatory material is deleted in the film, though Bluthal's voiceover is used once ("Lord Tennyson is seventy-one!") and one further piece of the narration is spoken on-screen by Milligan while simultaneously playing McGonagall.

As for the Max Miller enigma, that was solved quite delightfully by the script, and revealed



Milligan's Miller costume - from Q

as a delightfully typical piece of deliberate Milligan confusion. The first point to remember is that the whole film is a performance, so the political agitator both is and isn't 'real' in a narrative sense.

McGonagall, the film does not explain, is in the theatre to perform his act. He seems merely a spectator, who celebrates his successful foiling of the assassination attempt – "pausing only to wallpaper myself" – with an impromptu recitation of 'Mary From the Dairy'.

The script calls for McGonagall to deliver one of his poems in an ingratiating theatrical style which the script innocently describes as "Max Miller all the way", meaning of course in a pseudo-Max Miller style. But two telling script amendments reveal what must have happened. In the first place, we read 'Max Miller outfit'. This presumably means that such an outfit was located by chance, and suggested as a way of making the point even funnier. So much funnier that McGonagall is still wearing this splendid silk item on returning to his

poverty-ravaged home in the next sequence. (The fact that such a suit appears at least twice in Milligan's television work suggests that it may even have been his own. Certainly the decision to use it here carries his, rather than McGrath's, fingerprints.)

Then, in the second script alteration, the poem crossed through, and replaced in biro with "I fell in love with Mary from the dairy". Thus in quasi-logical sequence, we are able to take a privileged look at the exact thought processes whereby a dauntingly obscure idea for the first scene of a biographical film was transformed into a totally and impossibly meaningless one. *Finnegan's Wake*, indeed.

The first scene with anything like a foothold in reality is McGonagall's performance as Macbeth. Struggling manfully with his eccentric Scottish accent, Milligan does extremely heightened work throughout the film, but now that his character is himself supposed to be giving an exaggerated performance he reaches uncharted heights of incomprehensibility – "overacting at its best", to borrow a phrase he uses throughout *Q*. In this he is more than well-served visually by his ghoulish white make-up, fake eyebrows and beard over his real ones, and the armour of a Samurai warrior. This last item was lent to McGrath by a friend, and its availability is the sole reason for its use in this quite inappropriate context (to the sound of another curious rendition of *Amazing Grace*, this time given neo-Japanese treatment). Its presence, however, inspired the director to mount an eccentric tribute to Akira Kurosawa: in a moment supposedly "stolen directly from *Seven Samurai*" Milligan's McGonagall's Macbeth falls to his death in slow motion beneath a caption reading 'Live From Dundee'.

Kurosawa-style slow motion features in most of McGrath's work, in fact, and is far from the only act of cinema homage in *McGonagall*. The delightfully artificial scene in which McGonagall walks to Balmoral has Milligan walk several times across the Wilton's stage in front of a backdrop of cardboard mountains, decorated with a fake moon on a string and a stuffed stag, amidst a blizzard of artificial snow.

MCGRATH: The snow and all that; again, it's Japanese theatre, Kurosawa, and Fellini. It's all stolen! Did you ever see Fellini's *Casanova*? Great film, that. And it's all artificial: he built Venice, and instead of sea he uses black polythene. Amazing film.

Likewise the eerily effective moment in which Sellers's Queen Victoria seems to glide rigidly off-screen past the camera is inspired by Garbo at the end of *Queen Christina*.

We are similarly distracted from the true substance of the story in the final scenes, which do nonetheless contain Milligan's most poignant acting moments. Here the film conspires to give McGonagall the worthy, heroic send off that real life had denied him, not with pure invention but with cunning manipulation of historical fact. As the poet lies beaten in his bed, his wife informs him that a published account of his futile excursion to Balmoral has



ironically brought him renown at last. McGonagall is then visited by four rival Lord Tennysons of which Valentine Dyall's is identified as authentic. (We know him to be the genuine article, as we have already seen him in his bed amorously reciting 'Come into the garden, Maud' to a naked black woman.) As he undresses and joins McGonagall in bed he tells him of a series of honours conferred upon him by the king of the Andaman Islands. The text, what little we hear of it over McGonagall's requests to

his wife for tea and biscuits, is adapted from a genuine letter reproduced in the poet's autobiography, but the true signatory is not Tennyson but someone claiming to be the Poet Laureate of Burmah. Almost certainly a practical joke, it convinced McGonagall (who always signed himself 'Knight of the White Elephant of Burmah' thereafter) and the film honours his memory by taking him at his word. Indeed, it has King Theebaw himself join McGonagall and Tennyson in bed to confer the honour in person. "Happy, darling?" asks Tennyson. Yes, McGonagall replies, but he is very tired. As he drifts into sleep we realise that this has been another fantasy, and the Great McGonagall is dead.

Our final image of the film is of McGonagall lying dead, while on the soundtrack Milligan recites, for once clearly and movingly, lines taken from McGonagall's own self-prepared elegy:

I earnestly hope the inhabitants of the beautiful city of Dundee
Will appreciate this little volume got up by me,
And when they read its pages, I hope it will fill their hearts with delight,
While seated around the fireside on a cold winter's night;
And some of them no doubt, will let a silent tear fall
In dear remembrance of WILLIAM MCGONAGALL.

It is a fitting end, both for McGonagall and for the film, especially so when viewed in the knowledge that even in its dying moments the film remains true to its theatrical, anti-cinematic ethic. For the moving final lines are not dubbed onto the soundtrack. They are recorded live, and are spoken by Milligan, still in shot, lying on the bed under a sheet.

The authors would like to thank Joe McGrath, John Bluthal, Victor Spinetti, Ray Cooney and Christine Rodgers of Wilton's Music Hall for their generous assistance in the preparation of this article.

Mr Strangelove: A Biography Of Peter Sellers by Ed Sikov

Review by Peter Gordon

It seems compulsory, once every four or five years, for some young comedy actor to be touted as "the new Peter Sellers". This is a two-edged sword. Firstly, it means that the actor has something of Sellers' mercurial ability to subsume his own identity beneath that of his character, and possesses Sellers' instinctive grasp of how to mine to comic potential of a character. On the other side, the business side of the showbiz formula, it means that the comic actor in question might, just might, be able to crack Hollywood. In many ways, that was Sellers' most astonishing achievement, for a man to graduate from the UK's spit and sawdust of the variety halls and the cardboard and string world of the steam-driven radio to L.A. stardom. Not since the days of Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel had a British comedian enjoyed such success in Hollywood. Others have since tried to emulate Sellers' trans-Atlantic move, but never with quite the same results. Marty Feldman couldn't seem to find a suitable home for his quirky talents before Universal cancelled his contract a year before his death from heart failure. Dudley Moore fared a little better and, for a while, became an A-list celebrity on the back of his two most successful films, *10* and *Arthur* - but after that brief hiatus Moore's career went into steady decline and, although he was held in great affection until his death, his popularity and bankability were never quite the same again.

Sellers' story, however, is more of a roller-coaster ride. The great-great grandson of noted Jewish pugilist Daniel Mendoza, born and raised in the world of the music hall, he first found fame as the main vocal talent on *The Goon Show*, the programme that really starts any account of modern British comedy. He took America by storm with films like *Lolita*, *The Pink Panther* and *Dr. Strangelove*, became a star, managed to ruin *Casino Royale* single-handedly, did far too many *Panther* movies, made some brilliant, hardly seen movies like *The Blockhouse* and *The Great McGonagall*, and finally conquered the world again with *Being There* shortly before dying (we'll draw a veil over the posthumously released and utterly terrible *Fu Manchu* film). And in between all these we've got Sellers himself, an ego-maniac, a user and abuser of people, capable of acts of immense generosity and terrible cruelty.



It's a story that has attracted a number of biographers over the years, the latest of whom is Ed Sikov. Sikov, indeed, pays handsome tribute to all his predecessors with one notable exception. He praises Peter Evans' *Man Behind The Mask* from 1968 (which, though good, is perhaps a bit too early in Seller's career to be objective) and Alexander Walker's 1981 *Authorised Biography* (a book that rather relies on the reader having time for Walker's rather overbearing prose style), along with the personal memoirs of Sellers' friend Graham Stark (*Remembering*

Peter Sellers 1990) and his son Michael Sellers (*PS: I Love You* 1981). The notable exception to Sikov's roll-call is Roger Lewis' book *The Life And Death Of Peter Sellers* (1994), the only other book of comparable size on Sellers' life. But fans of Lewis' book who have followed the controversy since its publication will recognise a number of references to it in all but name throughout Sikov's volume. The omission of Lewis' name is no mere accident or bout of professional jealousy on Sikov's part. In many ways Sikov's book is as a specific rebuttal of Lewis' work.

Roger Lewis has made something of a name for himself as a controversial biographer. His 1994 book deeply upset a great many of Sellers' friends, family and fans, depicting this most loved and revered of British comedy actors as an egotistical tyrant, a wife beater and serial adulterer - a deluded fantasist who, when the world failed to live up to his fantasy, took his frustration out on those around him. According to Lewis, he was a mean horror of a man who bullied his son and virtually ignored the existence of his two daughters. Lewis went on to write a similarly reputation-smashing biography of Lawrence Olivier and is currently coming under heavy flak for his recent book on Anthony Burgess. Lewis' method is seen as that of an intellectual Albert Goldman or Kitty Kelly - taking a subject and deliberately intending to rubbish them before the world. *Private Eye's* Bookman column reported back in 1999, when word first got out that Lewis' next subject was to be Burgess, that he had telephoned his publishers to tell them he intended to "crucify the bastard".

But, for all its faults, Lewis' book on Sellers has a visceral energy about it. It has a wild structure to it that eschews almost any conventional concept of chronology. It zaps backwards and forwards in time, and has footnotes that sometimes feel like whole chapters in themselves. Lewis has no problem with indulging whatever pet psychological theory that comes to his mind, and no embarrassment about admitting that the book is as much about his own reaction to Sellers' life and work as it is about Sellers himself. Many of those who agreed to be interviewed by Lewis subsequently claimed that he took things they said out of context, focussing purely on the negative, but his frenetic portrayal of a human monster of almost Shakespearian proportions is never less than compelling. Lewis was certainly not afraid of making enemies among Sellers' friends and family – two years before the book came out Graham Stark successfully sued the *Daily Telegraph* for an article Lewis wrote about him. (In the book itself, Lewis seems to take a disturbingly malicious delight in taunting Stark, another of the former's less appealing characteristics.)

Sikov's guarded references to Lewis (particularly the note in his acknowledgements that for "reasons that will be obvious to anyone who has followed the course of Peter Sellers's [*sic*] reputation after his death, his immediate family declined to speak to me about him...") mark out a deliberate *raison d'être* for his book: To repair the damage that many of Sellers' family, friends and fans think Lewis did. Sikov takes a distinctly sober approach to re-telling the Sellers story – events are generally told in order in which they happened; where Lewis would constantly question the truth or motivation behind various anecdotes (a technique that can occasionally be illuminating, but is just as likely to be deeply annoying) Sikov tends to take them on face value. This can sometimes make Sikov seem a bit worthy but dull, but for all that he might lack the fireworks of Lewis, his conventional approach to chronology and anecdotage has very definite merits.

The difference in Sikov and Lewis' approach can be seen in their attitude to Sellers' Semitic origins. Sellers was half-Jewish (on his mother's side) and while he never attended synagogue or got Bar Mitzvahed (indeed, his mother enrolled him in a Roman Catholic school), both Lewis and Sikov see it as an important part of Sellers' make up. For Lewis, it's an affectation of alienation: "It was a way to try and justify feeling different, feeling a refugee from normal life... Jewishness, like a stammer for Philip Larkin, was 'a built in handicap to put him one down' – or, more accurately, if he wanted to pretend to be one down. It was a pretext for grudges." For Sikov, however, it has no such dark psychological ramifications, it is simply part of Sellers' showbiz heritage. Importantly, while Lewis, writing from the point of view of the Anglocentric comedy world, sees Sellers' Jewishness as making him an outsider. Sikov writes from the American, Hollywood perspective, where Sellers' Semitism is inclusive, putting him in the tradition of so many other great Jewish comedy performers.

But, for all this, Sikov's is no sycophantic air-brushing of history. He does not shy away from Sellers' darker side. You'll find all the stories of his threatening the life of various

wives, his outright abuse of his son, his temper tantrums on film sets, the friends and colleagues he shafted along the way. But once again, where Lewis stands in judgement over his subject, Sikov is content to note that these things happened and move on. As before, each approach has its own advantages, depending on how much taste you have for Lewis' frantic prose or Sikov's sturdy story telling.

While there *are* benefits of Sikov's method, it can occasionally be frustrating and one does sometimes long for a good bout of Lewis-esque theory-making and psychobabble. When Sikov notes that Sellers particularly enjoyed circus dwarves as a child one can almost hear Lewis steeling himself to deliver a lecture of Sellers' perverse joy in the physical deformity in another huge, venom spitting footnote. Sikov, however, contents himself with the observation "The midget act's merry idiocy spoke to him". Sikov picks up on Sellers' habit of wandering around public parks giving wads of cash to tramps, but he then fails to make the connection between that and the opening sequence of *The Magic Christian*, which seems, frankly, rather negligent.

Other aspects of Sikov's style can grate rather. The chapter-linking device of quotations from Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books doesn't make any sense (Sellers as Alice? I think not) and quickly becomes very annoying. Also irksome is Sikov's switching between calling his subject "Sellers" and "Peter" for no discernable reason that I could find. I don't know why I find a biographer calling his subject by his first name irritating, but it is (perhaps because it implies a degree of unobjective and forced mateyness).

But, the way he tells the story aside, does Sikov offer the Sellers devotee anything new? Well, not much. His list of interviewees is dwarfed by Lewis', and much of his interview material comes from the excellent three-part *Arena* special broadcast by the BBC in 1995. The one big coup he has over Lewis is his interview with Roman Polanski, the film director and Sellers' friend in the late 1960s. None of the stories he tells are new (Lewis has already lifted them from Polanski's memoirs for his book), but he does go into more detail. Sikov has also managed to track down a couple of films Lewis missed, such as the early Goonish effort *The Super Secret Service* (much though he tries to hide it, one cannot help but feel that Sikov doesn't really get Goon humour), and the Polanski-directed *A Day At The Beach*. (Readers of Lewis will recall that he dedicates an entire (very entertaining) appendix to his attempts to track this latter film down and, from Sikov's tantalising description of it, it sounds worth every bit of the fuss Lewis makes of trying to find it.)

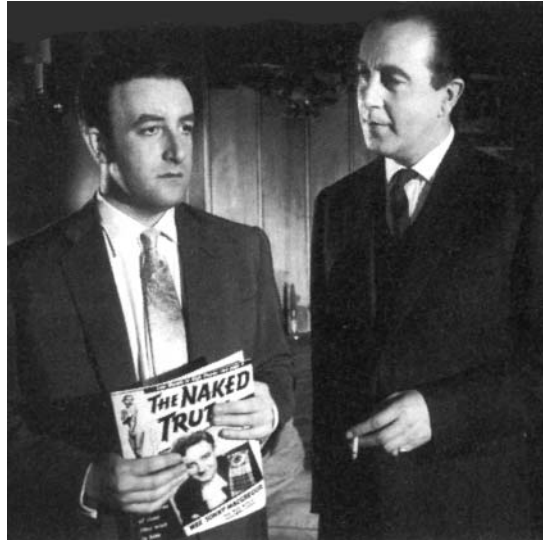
As for their dissections of Sellers' various appearances, Lewis is once again the more urgent, the more energetic. I can still remember reading *The Life And Death Of Peter Sellers* for the first time and being excited about his descriptions of Sellers' performances, and they set a standard for writing about a British comedy actor's skills that, to this day, has yet to be equalled. I may not have agreed with, say, his weighty expositions on the cinema

of Stanley Kubrik, but I always enjoyed them. Sikov, once again, is less dazzling. His summaries of each performance tend to be one of two paragraphs. They are usually hard to argue with, but then they are usually far from controversial. That said, Sikov does claim that *A Shot In The Dark* is one of Sellers' finest films, so he wins extra points from me there.

Strangely, though, I was left with an empty feeling after both Sikov and Lewis's books. I still don't feel either man has really got the heart of what motivated Sellers – what drove him to such heights of success (OK, so he was ridiculously talented, but anyone who thinks that's all you need to make it in Hollywood is

lamentably naïve), and what drove him to fuck it all up in the grand fashion he did on films such as *Casino Royale*? What motivated his emotionally incontinent acts of meanness and generosity towards his friends and family? Lewis called him a shit, a madman and evil, reflecting Lewis' own tendencies towards abuse, pseudo-science and moralising. Sikov, where he probes beneath the skin of Sellers, explains away his subject's character by pointing to his over-bearing mother who never gave her only son the normal moral boundaries. Neither answer really satisfies.

Interestingly, both writers compare Sellers to Orson Welles' Charles Foster Kane (Jed Leland: "[Kane] behaved like a swine [...] Not that he was brutal, he just did brutal things.") A natural enough form of identification for the two authors – *Citizen Kane* is the story of a biographer piecing together the story of a larger than life character (one could take this metaphor a step further, casting Graham Stark as Herbert Carter, the man who keeps Kane's legend and reputation alive, living under the shadow of his portrait; Spike Milligan as Leland, the more cynical, detached and judgemental critic of his old friend). Like Kane, Sellers is at his most exciting as a young man getting his first taste of power, but all ready displaying signs of the insecurities and megalomania that were to mark his later years. But 'Rosebud' in *Citizen Kane* is a film's narrative device for unlocking a man's soul. In real life we have no such easy way of seeing into the psyche of a richly talented but turbulent man like Sellers. Still, the films are still damn funny, some of them.



Mr Strangelove: A Biography of Peter Sellers [Sidgwick & Jackson 2002; ISBN: 0283072970]

Up your player

What's coming out on VHS video or DVD soon? Here's your guide to the new and upcoming releases on interest to fans of elderly British comedy. As elsewhere, we reserve the right to ignore stuff we're not interested in, so there's no point in asking about the forthcoming 'ALLO 'ALLO tapes. If you have any other ideas for features for the magazine that we can easily rip off of TV Zone, please drop us a line.

Recent releases

- EVER DECREASING CIRCLES **DVD** **VHS** Network
Series 3. Superior domestic sitcom with Richard Briers, Peter Egan and Penelope Wilton. Written by ever-reliable Esmonde and Larbey. Series 1 and 2 came out last year.
- SYKES – THE 1ST COLOUR SERIES **DVD** **VHS** Network
It is what it says. Includes the episode with Peter Sellers.

31 March 2003

- ABBOTT AND COSTELLO
LAUGH-A-THON **DVD**
No fixed details as yet, but should feature JACK AND THE BEANSTALK, AFRICA SCREAMS and clips from their television show.
- THE VERY BEST OF THE MUPPET SHOW vols 1 & 2 **VHS** UCA
Compilation of the best moments of puppet-comedy genius

7 April 2003

- BUTTERFLIES **DVD** Acorn
Complete Series 2 of Carla Lane's passable winsomeness starring Wendy Craig. A must for fans of forgettable mediocrity.

14 April 2003

- DOCTOR IN THE HOUSE -
COMPLETE COLLECTION **DVD** Carlton
The films rather than the sitcom. Includes Doctor In The House/ Clover/ Distress/ Love/ Trouble/ At Sea/ At Large. Each film will also be available to buy individually. Leslie Philips all the way.
- EARLY BIRD/ PRESS FOR TIME **DVD** **VHS** Carlton
Double bill of Norman Wisdom for those happy souls who find him funny.
- MONTY PYTHON BOX SET **DVD** **VHS** Columbia
Details are scant so far, but we think this a collection of all the feature films, including

And Now For Something Completely Different.

MONTY PYTHON: LIFE OF BRIAN **DVD** **VHS** Columbia

With documentary. Missing the commentaries from the earlier Critereon release.

ON THE BEAT/ MAN OF THE MOMENT **DVD** **VHS** Carlton

More Norman Wisdom japes.

THE REBEL/ THE PUNCH AND
JUDY MAN **DVD** Warner

Tony Hancock's two starring roles on the big screen, neither of which is nearly as bad as most will have you believe.

SCHOOL FOR SCOUNDRELS/
THE GREEN MAN **DVD** Warner

A feast of Alastair Sim. Firstly the tale of Ian Carmichael, Terry-Thomas and the School Of Lifemanship, taken from Stephen Potter's excellent books. Then Sim as a clockmaker-cum-bungling assassin.

21 April 2003

ALICE IN WONDERLAND **DVD** **VHS** BFI

Jonathan Miller's beautiful and eerie interpretation of Lewis Carroll's masterpiece, set in an abandoned asylum. Starring Peter Cook, Peter Sellers and Alan Bennnett.

THE YEAR OF THE SEX OLYMPICS **DVD** **VHS** BFI

Penned by Nigel Kneale and starring Leonard Rossitor. A sci-fi satire-cum-prediction of the age of shows like Big Brother and Survivor.

28 April

EALING COMEDY GIFT SET **DVD** Warner

Following on from their very successful Guinness-based Ealing Comedy Box Set of last year, this title draws on other titles from the famous studios. The selection of the three features is a tad predictable, Hue And Cry, Passport To Pimlico and The Titchfield Thunderbolt, but they're all lovely none the less.

THE GOODIES – AT LAST! **DVD** **VHS** Network

Two disc set featuring 8 episodes, including Kitten Kong, Ecky Thump and Saturday Night Grease. Excellent.

5 May 2003

THE BEST OF MONTY PYTHON **DVD** (3 discs) BBC

Who on Earth is this release aimed at? Surely the thirty quid price tag would put off a curious newcomer, whereas the hardcore fan would only be satisfied with the full four series? Not simply another a way to rip off the absolute completeist, surely? Extras include a sing-a-long Lumberjack Song and the original Radio Times listings. Whoopefuckingdoo.

