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**Opening Extract from...**

## **The Very Best of the Secret Policeman's Ball**

Written by Amnesty International

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A  
**POKE**  
IN THE  
**EYE**

*with a*  
**(SHARP  
STICK)**

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Jonathan Lynn  
Joe Melia  
Jonathan Miller  
Bill Oddie  
and  
Michael Palin



A  
POKE  
IN  
THE  
EYE *(with a sharp stick)*

# BEGINNINGS

## AN INTRODUCTION

It started with a cheque. Signed 'J. Cleese', it arrived in the post at Amnesty International's London headquarters early in 1976 and ended up on the desk of its Assistant Director, Peter Luff. The timing could not have been better.

'We were getting steadily poorer,' Luff recalls. 'Most of our fundraising came from authors such as John Fowles, Samuel Beckett or Margaret Drabble giving us their manuscripts to auction.' The sight of that cheque from John Cleese, late of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and now more popular than ever thanks to *Fawlty Towers*, sparked a bright idea for a bold new approach: a high profile comedy event, featuring Cleese and 'a few friends' – the most illustrious of his fellow performers – staged in support of Amnesty on the occasion of its fifteenth anniversary.

The novelty of such a possible collaboration was obvious. British comedians had no track record of working hand-in-hand with charities (the most notable fundraising event in recent memory had been mounted to help *Private Eye* pay off its legal fees) nor – since the satire boom of the early 1960s – had there been any significant comic intervention into politics, aside from *Private Eye*. George Orwell might have claimed that 'every joke is a tiny revolution', but most of the nation's joke-tellers preferred to err on the side of conservatism. Amnesty International, however, was about to challenge the cosy world of charity fundraising. With the help of John Cleese and friends, they were about to invent something completely different.

Even during the economic and political turmoil of Cold War Britain, few comedians in the mid-1970s seemed inclined to get involved in the great debates of the day. John Cleese was about to prove an exception to the rule. As he later explained, he had joined Amnesty International after he 'suddenly realised how nice it was

to live in a country where people didn't come to your front door at 2 a.m., and take you away and hand you over to people who've been specially trained to hurt you as much as possible'.

When Peter Luff called him, therefore, Cleeese was happy to help. 'It seemed like the most obvious thing in the world,' Cleeese recalled about the stage show. 'Because that's the one thing, I guess, that I knew how to organise.' Indeed, Luff found that Cleeese was eager to snap into action: 'He said, "If I'm going to do this, we've got to do it for two or three nights – there's no point in doing it just for one night. You find the theatre, I'll give you the telephone numbers of the people, and if you can get them we'll go ahead." And except for a couple of them, who were away or couldn't manage it, they all said yes.'

London theatres proved harder to secure. They were fully booked with on-going productions. Undaunted, Amnesty simply decided to start the shows after the audience had left from that night's production. Her Majesty's Theatre was the chosen venue, and on 1, 2 and 3 April (Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights) in 1976 a new comedy genre was born.

Among the friends and colleagues whom Cleeese recruited were his fellow Pythons (minus Eric Idle, who was otherwise engaged), The Goodies and the former members of the *Beyond the Fringe* quartet (minus Dudley Moore, who was working in America), as well as the likes of Eleanor Bron, John Fortune, John Bird, Neil Innes and Barry Humphries. In piecing together such a cast, Cleeese was effectively uniting two generations of great British (and Australian) comic talent to revive their best routines.

In a way, the artists who were unable to appear were as important to establishing the future format of the shows as the artists who were able to make it. Python members played Dudley Moore's roles in *Beyond the Fringe* sketches and Peter Cook became an honorary Python. Audiences loved seeing these unique collaborations and this became an enduring element of future Balls.

Cleeese chose, as a working title for the show, *An Evening Without David Frost*, as it seemed that the man whom Peter Cook had dubbed



‘The Bubonic Plagiarist’ was the missing link to everyone else in the cast. Thinking better of it, he then decided to name the event *A Poke in the Eye (With A Sharp Stick)*.

With artists and venue booked, everyone met for lunch at Bertorelli’s restaurant in Bayswater to discuss how the project should proceed. Luff recalls: ‘Alan Bennett suggested that alphabetical billing on the posters and programmes would help, until John Fortune responded wryly that it would certainly help Alan.’ Consensus was quickly achieved when it came to deciding on the contents of the show: everyone’s ‘greatest hits’ – which would not only be relatively easy to rehearse but would also serve as a celebration of a quarter of a century of the country’s most distinctive and distinguished comedy material.

Cleese and Amnesty agreed the atmosphere should be relaxed and informal. The shows were starting close to midnight, the already warmed up audience of comedy fans would be coming from pubs and other shows – and the unprecedented assembly of artists should have fun onstage with their peers and enjoy the backstage camaraderie. Tickets for the shows, advertised exclusively in *Private Eye*, sold out within four days. Intrigued, the filmmaker Roger Graef

persuaded Amnesty to grant him access to make a *cinema vérité*-style documentary of the event.

Rehearsals soon dispelled any fears of clashes between competing egos among the comedy greats. 'I must admit,' Jonathan Miller (who directed) remembers, 'there was a moment in that chilly theatre on that first, cold Sunday morning when I felt the idea had no justification and it might well be a disaster. But people were greeting each other, getting together again, and it was very companionable.' John Cleese would agree, noting how eager everyone seemed to be to promote a positive atmosphere: 'I think the fear of being *thought* competitive is greater than the desire to *be* competitive.' The only minor tensions occurred when the always-inventive Miller suggested ways to 'improve' the other performers' routines, such as Cleese's memorably bad-tempered clash between the Pope and Michelangelo. (Cleese's co-star Jonathan Lynn recalls that Miller 'suggested I play my part a little camp – because Michelangelo was gay. And I remember I saw John shaking his head solemnly behind him.')

When the first night finally arrived the cast were taken aback at the welcome they received. 'John Cleese walked out onto the stage with a parrot cage and the theatre erupted,' Peter Luff recalls. 'We had no idea people would laugh so much.' Buoyed by the warmth of the reaction, each performer began to relax, improvise and extend their routines: 'You didn't really need a director,' Alan Bennett observed dryly. 'You wanted a snatch squad, really, to go on and get them off, because everybody did twice as much as they said they were going to do.' The planned two-and-a-half-hour running time was thus stretched out to four, but there were no complaints from the audience, who knew they were witnessing a very special moment in comedy history.

Buoyed by the success of the event, Amnesty staged another one the following year, and a new tradition was duly established. Some thirty-two years on from Orwell's famous remark, British comedy was at last ready and willing to spark some tiny revolutions.



# THE DEAD PARROT SKETCH

JOHN CLEESE & MICHAEL PALIN



*A customer, carrying a bird cage, enters a pet shop.*

CLEESE: I wish to register a complaint.

*(The owner doesn't respond.)*

PALIN: Sorry, we're closed for lunch.

CLEESE: Never mind that, my lad. I wish to complain about this parrot what I purchased not half an hour ago from this very boutique.

PALIN: Oh yes, the, uh, the Norwegian Blue . . . What's, uh . . . What's wrong with it?

CLEESE: I'll tell you what's wrong with it, my lad. It's dead, that's what's wrong with it!

PALIN: No, no, 'e's, uh . . . he's resting.

CLEESE: Look, matey, I know a dead parrot when I see one, and I'm looking at one right now . . .

PALIN: No, no, he's not *dead*, squire, he's, he's *restin'*! Remarkable bird, the Norwegian Blue, innit, eh? Beautiful *plumage*!

CLEESE: The plumage don't enter into it. 'E's *stone dead*.

PALIN: No, no, no, no, no, *no*! 'E's *resting*!

CLEESE: All right then, if he's restin', I'll wake him up! (*Shouting at the cage.*) 'Ello, Mister Polly Parrot! I've got a nice fresh cuttlefish for you if you wake up . . .

(*Owner hits the cage.*)

PALIN: *There* – he moved!

CLEESE: No, he didn't – that was *you* hitting the cage!

PALIN: I never!!

CLEESE: Yes, you did!

PALIN: I didn't do anything!

CLEESE: (*Yelling and hitting the cage repeatedly.*) 'ELLO, POLLY!!!! Wakey wakey!!!! (*Removes parrot from cage and bangs it on counter.*) Testing! Testing! (*Bangs parrot a couple more times on counter.*) This is your nine o'clock alarm call! (*Thumps its head on the counter yet again, then throws it up in the air and watches it plummet to the floor.*)

CLEESE: Now that's what I call a dead parrot.

PALIN: No, 'e's stunned!

CLEESE: *STUNNED?!?!?*

PALIN: Yeah! You stunned him, just as he was wakin' up! Norwegian Blues stun easily!

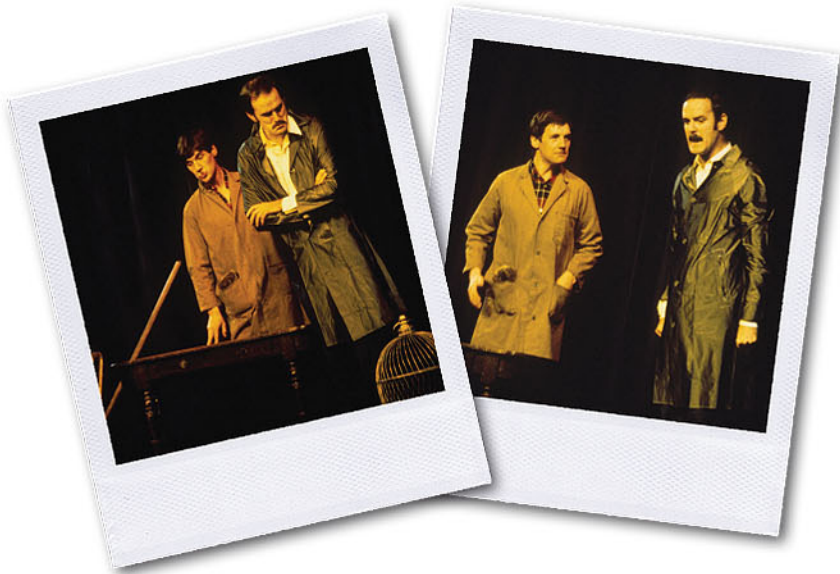
CLEESE: Now listen, matey, I've definitely had enough of this. That parrot is definitely deceased, and when I purchased it not 'alf an hour ago, you assured me that its total lack of movement was due to it being tired and shagged out following a prolonged squawk.

PALIN: Well, he's . . . he's, ah . . . probably pining for the fjords.

CLEESE: *PININ' for the FJORDS?!?!?!?!?* (*Palin corpses.*) *PININ' for the FJORDS?!?!?!?!?* What kind of talk is that? (*Palin still*

*struggles to regain his composure.*) This is nothing to laugh at! Look, why did he fall flat on his back the moment I got 'im home?

PALIN: The Norwegian Blue prefers kippin' on its back! Remarkable bird, ain't it, squire? Beautiful *plumage!*



CLEESE: Look, I took the liberty of examining that parrot when I got it home, and I discovered the only reason that it had been sitting on its perch in the first place was that it had been *NAILED* there.

PALIN: Well, of course it was *nailed* there! If I hadn't nailed that bird there, it would have muscled up to those bars, bent 'em apart with its beak, and *VOOM!*

CLEESE: '*VOOM?!?*' Mate, this bird wouldn't 'voom' if you put four million volts through it! 'E's bleedin' *demised!*

PALIN: No, no! 'E's *pinning!*

CLEESE: 'E's *NOT* pining! 'E's *passed on!* This parrot is no more! He has ceased to be! It's a stiff!'E's snuffed it! Bereft of life, he rests in peace! 'E's in-du-bit-ab-ly extinct! THIS IS AN EX-PARROT!!

PALIN: (*Pausing to reflect on this information.*) Well, I'd better replace it, then.

(*He goes off in search of a replacement but soon returns empty-handed.*)

CLEESE: What's the news?

PALIN: Sorry, squire, I've had a look out the back, and uh, we're right out of parrots.

CLEESE: (*Testily.*) I see, I see, I get the picture.

PALIN: I got a slug.

CLEESE: (*Cautiously.*) Does it talk?

PALIN: Yeah.

CLEESE: Right, I'll have that one then!

---



**'No, no, he's not dead,  
squire, he's restin'!'**

*Michael Palin*

# T.E. LAWRENCE

ALAN BENNETT



*The spotlight picks out Alan Bennett, hands tucked into tweed pockets, staring into space with the distracted air of an Oxbridge academic.*

T.E. Lawrence – the man, and the myth. Which is man, and which is myth? Is this fact, or is it lies? What is truth, and what is fable? Where is Ruth? And where is Mabel?

To some of these questions I hope to be able to provide the answer.

No one who knew T.E. Lawrence, as I did – scarcely at all – could fail but to be deeply impressed by him. It was in pursuit of this legend that I first sought him out, in June of 1933, at his cottage at Cloud's Hill in Dorset. It was a simple cottage, but I thought I detected Lawrence's hand in the rough whitewashed wall, the stout paved doorstep, and the rough oak door, upon which I knocked, lightly. It was opened by a small, rather unprepossessing figure – slight of frame, fair-haired – with the ruddy, gleaming face of a schoolboy . . .

. . . It *was* a schoolboy. I had come to the wrong house.

'Horrance,' the Arabs called him, for they are unable to pronounce their Ls . . . as distinct from the Chinese, who can pronounce little else . . . It's interesting – though fruitless – to speculate, but had fate taken him to China, he would have been known as 'Lollance'. That is by the way . . .

'Shaw', or 'Ross' as Lawrence now called himself, returned from the East in 1919. Shyness had always been a disease with him, and it was shyness and a longing for anonymity that made him disguise himself. Clad in the magnificent white silk robes of

an Arab prince, within his belt the short curved gold sword of the Ashrab descendants of the Prophet, he hoped to pass unnoticed through London. Alas, he was mistaken.

‘Who am I?’ he would cry, despairingly. ‘You are Lawrence of Arabia!’ passers-by would stop him and say, ‘. . . and I claim my five pounds.’

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## HAPPY, DARLING

### ELEANOR BRON & JOHN FORTUNE



*A young couple are sitting down, the man with his arms wrapped around the woman's shoulders like a thick winter scarf.*

FORTUNE: Happy, darling?

BRON: *Mmmm.*

FORTUNE: What are you thinking?

BRON: Oh, nothing. I was just thinking of something you once said. About there being three phases which always crop up when an affair's coming to an end. The first was: ‘Happy, darling?’ The second was: ‘What are you thinking?’ Ha, I can't remember what the third one was.

FORTUNE: Ha, silly, darling. (*Hugs her tighter.*) I love you.

BRON: Oh yes, *that's* it!

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