

A Life in Television: Michael Palin

17 March 2015 at Princess Anne Theatre, BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly, London

Andrew Newman, Chair

of BAFTA's Television Committee: Last year, we launched BAFTA's "A Life in Television" strand, a new series of live onstage events celebrating leading creative figures from the world of television, shining a light on their talent and exploring what makes them unique, significant and relevant to British culture. Tonight we're lucky enough to be looking at the extraordinary career of Michael Palin CBE; actor, comedian, writer, presenter and BAFTA fellow. In a career spanning five decades, Michael has amazed and educated audiences across the UK and around the world on television, in film and on the stage. Specifically in TV he's been innovative time and time again, and set the quality bar extremely high in many genres, from comedy to documentary, from serious drama to political satire, and even on children's television. Michael's skill as a performer and a writer is demonstrated by this stunning versatility. After writing for a number of the best comedy shows of the sixties he came to the attention of the wider public as part of the world's most famous comedy troupe, Monty Python. This groundbreaking sketch show defied conventions and redefined television comedy, with its influence still being cited by comedians today. Michael went on to star in the BAFTA-winning *Ripping Yarns* in 1976, as well as in dramatic roles that have included political drama *G.B.H.* in 1991, and last year's *Remember Me* on BBC One. But in parallel to this, Michael pioneered a new genre of presenter-led, funny, factual travel and arts documentaries, starting with *Great Railway Journeys of the World* in 1980, and since then he's travelled *Around the World in 80 Days*, from *Pole to Pole*, and been pretty much everywhere on the globe up to and including *Brazil* in 2012. In 2013 Michael Palin received the BAFTA Fellowship, and last year he was part of the enormously successful, and I believe lucrative, Monty Python reunion. But for those of us old enough to remember it the first time round, perhaps as exciting as any of that is that we will be able to see and hear him narrating a new version of the classic children's television series *The Clangers*, later this year. I'd also like to thank our host tonight, he's another renaissance man with many talents: BAFTA-winning writer, actor, comedian and children's author. He's also a proper comedy icon in his own right, and since last Friday he's also the holder of the Guinness World Record for the most kisses in a minute, David Walliams. We're delighted that Rathbones Investment Management

has chosen to support our new strand of live events, BAFTA: A Life in Television. Rathbones has a long history of supporting the arts, youth and sports initiatives across the UK which nurture young talent, and it's proud to help us celebrate some of the leading figures in British television, providing inspiration for the next generation. And a bit of housekeeping, we're filming tonight and audio recording the event for future release on BAFTA Guru and possible broadcast, so therefore could we ask you not to film it on your mobile phones or anything like that. And any press or other content requests can be directed to the Learning & Events team at BAFTA, at events@bafta.org and we'll respond to you quickly. Thanks from me, and please welcome our host, David Walliams.

[Applause]

David Walliams: Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to BAFTA: A Life in Television. It's not every night you get to share the stage with one of your comedy idols, but for Michael Palin tonight that dream has come true.

[Laughter and applause]

It's an incredible 50-year career that has made him one of the nation's most popular stars. Let's have a look at some of his work.

[Montage plays]

[Applause]

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Michael Palin.

[Applause]

So Michael, when did you first realise you were funny?

[Laughter]

Michael Palin: About 19 and a half, I suppose, first memory. I guess it was school, and I guess it was the fact that I could imitate the masters, the teachers and get a laugh as a result of that. Because I spent a lot of time at school observing them, and listening to their voices. I mean none of it went in, I didn't get an education, but I did get an education in character and sort of detail of physical movement, all that sort of

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thing, voices. And I found I, I just had a way, I was able to reproduce their voices, and people who were listening to them and were getting an education thought this was just amazing, and they laughed at me, so I suppose that was eight or nine.

DW: Okay. And then you started writing with Terry Jones; you met him at university, that's right. So how did you start writing together?

MP: Well I was writing actually at Oxford with a guy called Robert Hewison, who was the first person who actually encouraged me to do sketches in public. I mean he and I were in the same history set at Brasenose College, we made each other laugh, but he said, "Look, we can actually make some money out of this, we can do a cabaret and get 30 shillings a night by doing 30 minutes of cabaret." I didn't know what cabaret was, I came from Sheffield you know, cabaret was Parisian and naughty. And the first, the first gig he got us was the Oxford University Psychological Society Christmas party, and our act was greeted in total silence, but afterwards they said, "That was really good." Yeah, they said, "So much to think about."

[Laughter]

So Robert and I worked together, and then we met Terry who I loved. He was, he is, sorry he is, he is passionate and Welsh, and he smoked at that time and designed covers for magazines and all that sort of thing, he was also an actor, and I found him fascinating. But also he had a great sense of humour. I was in one of the main plays at Oxford that year, called *Fuenteovejuna*, a sort of very gritty story about Spanish peasants revolting in the 14th Century, and it was a very serious production, I was lucky to be cast as fourth peasant. And Terry saw it, and everything went wrong on the night, and he said it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen on the Oxford Theatre. So after that I realised I liked someone like that. And we wrote together, I suppose a little bit for the Revue of 1964 at the Edinburgh Festival, which is a key moment in my life because that's when I knew I could be funny, or other people could appreciate my humour who weren't just friends from Oxford. This was the Edinburgh Festival, people from all over the world, and David Frost, you know then wunderkind of television, came along.

DW: So he talent spotted you at the Edinburgh Festival?

MP: He talent spotted yeah, and me and Terry, and said, took our names, and two years later he was as good as his word and said, "Would you like to be writers in this new series called *The Frost Report*?"

DW: And you also wrote for *The Ken Dodd Show*, that's right, and *The Two Ronnies*.

MP: Yes, we didn't write much for *The Ken Dodd Show*, we weren't ideal Ken Dodd writers actually, and Terry made a big mistake because we went to see Ken at the Palladium, and we went to see him in his dressing room, and Terry went in the dressing room and I think he was a bit nervous, and he started kind of whistling away. [whistles] And Ken Dodd said, "Outside, outside. Get outside," because you know you can't, mustn't whistle in the dressing room, as you very well know. And Terry had to turn around three times, he thought it was a joke, but it was very serious for Ken Dodd. So he didn't do many of our jokes but we, a man called Russ Conway had his own show, you remember the [hums tune], we wrote a joke for him.

[Laughter]

DW: Well that's all we have time for, thank you so much. You wrote a joke for Russ Conway.

MP: Not many people know that, Russ Conway least of all.

[Laughter]

DW: So at this time you were writing for other people, were you frustrated you weren't performing?

MP: I was a little bit, because I enjoyed acting and I could act, and my father was very much against my acting in a sense that it might encourage me to try and take up acting as a career, and he knew that was fatal, and my sister had tried it and hadn't been very successful. So I had to act sort of under the radar, rather secretly and all that. And yeah, when we came to do *The Frost Report*, I would have loved to have been doing a little bit more of the acting, but Terry and myself we did little sketches, we were extras in the sketches

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with The Two Ronnies and John and all that, and that was fine.

DW: And then *Do Not Adjust Your Set* came along, and that was the first time you were really a lead performer.

MP: Yes. Humphrey Barclay, who was the man who'd sort of put on Cambridge Circus and all that, he recruited Terry and Eric, and Terry said, "Oh I don't want to do it unless my friend Mike can do it," and he said, "Well he's not very good is he? What does he do?" Well Terry said, "He's very funny," so it was rather sweet. Terry and Eric said, "Oh no, we won't do it without Mike", so I was sort of co-opted in, and from then on became one of the writers of two series of *Do Not Adjust Your Set*.

DW: I think we're going to have a look now at one of your very first TV appearances, which is actually from *The Complete and Utter History of Britain*.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

DW: So what was the point when you really wanted...have you got a...?

MP: I was just going to say this was the series that we did just before *Python*, sort of led to *Python*, because, I mean that was quite a funny bit, but there were six of them, they weren't all as funny. It was a brilliant series, but nobody watched it. And John Cleese rang up, this was early '69, and said "I've just seen your series, *The Complete and Utter History of Britain*." And I said, "Oh, that's good." He said, "Yes, you won't be doing many more of those, will you?"

[Laughter]

Which is very John, you know; take you one way then the other. And that's when he said, "Look, why don't we get together and bring Eric and Terry. We like what you write, and Graham will come along as well, and that strange American Terry Gilliam." That was really how *Python* began. Sorry, I'm probably leaping ahead.

DW: No that's all right, we'll come onto that later. But was there a definite sense from you and Terry that you wanted to take more control of your work?

MP: Yes, I mean that was, that was true really from *Do Not Adjust Your Set*. I can remember we had a lovely producer in the first series, and yet she kind of wanted us to, wanted to mould us into little characters that people weren't happy to be moulded into. And even then I can remember saying, "Well we've got to get someone who sees what we want to do and how we want to do it." Terry was very keen on, on directing, he was very keen on film. So he had very strong ideas on how comedy should be directed. So I think there was a certain amount of, of frustration when we got in other people to do it. I mean we had some very good people working for us, but I think I always felt, certainly as far as Terry was concerned, that he would rather be directing it himself right from early on. But it wasn't obviously until we did the first film, *Holy Grail*, that Terry actually got to direct.

DW: So we're going to jump forward to *Ripping Yarns* now, which was different to your previous work because it focused so much on narrative. Was that a conscious decision to move away from sketches?

MP: Yeah I think it was. We had done one sort of narrative piece for *Python*, it was called *The Cycling Tour*, and it was towards the end of the third series, about this man Pither who goes on a cycling tour of Devon, keeps falling off and all that, and it goes into a very strange world. But we tried to write, I mean most of it was a story, which is quite unusual for *Python*. When we, when *Python* sort of packed up, I think Terry and I thought how can we, how can we do something which will not look like it's the rump of *Python* - just we're trying to do *Python* but without the *Pythons*. And I think we both thought, well storyline, narrative, that's what's important, telling a story throughout the 30 minutes, it's something that we hadn't done that much of except that one *Python* show, let's try a bit more of that.

DW: And why did you arrive at that idea of *Ripping Yarns*?

MP: Well it's funny, I think Terry is, Terry had a book called *Ripping Yarns*, we all had lots of those sort of 1930s books, and his brother said, "Oh that's it you know," brother Nigel said, "Oh yeah, that book up there, you write something like that." And we did go away and start thinking about how you could, what sort of stories you could do. And immediately it was a very productive area, the yarns were always, there was a

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prison story, there was always a football story, a 'Roy of the Rovers' type story, there was school, horrific school stories. We suddenly found that there was a little, there was a nice little pool of stuff there which we could do, which would be different from *Python*, and which we could also, we could cast, we could do them as little dramas so we could actually cast actors in it. So people like Denholm Elliott who had not really done light entertainment before, but we thought he would just be wonderful in certain parts like the counsel in *Across The Andes By Frog*. Counsel always comes out of houses doing his flies up, you know, "Oh hello, what's going on here? Yes." And obviously irritated by the presence of this silly explorer and his frogs. So yeah, that's sort of, that's how it came, came together.

DW: I think we're going to have a look now at the episode *Tomkinson's Schooldays*.

MP: Alright.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

DW: And after that series went out I understand you received a letter from a very famous fan.

MP: Yes, yes. A joyful, well it was a card actually in his beautiful handwriting. It said, "Ripping Yarns, more please. Yours, Spike," and it was from Spike Milligan, and I treasure that.

DW: So were *The Goons* your comedy heroes growing up?

MP: Yes, yeah, I mean there were others, but *The Goons* meant more to me when I was, I suppose sort of that 12, 13 years old than any of the others. Because they were, they were quite unlike anything that my parents were enjoying, or the previous generation were enjoying. And we listened to the radio a lot, we didn't get telly till I was about 17 or so, but we'd listen to all the *Much-Binding-In-The-Marsh* and *Take It From Here* and all those things, sit around with my dad and mum. And then *The Goons* came along, and I realised this wasn't for them at all, in fact I was so, we had one radio set in the house, and I was so embarrassed that my dad would come in when *The Goons* were on you know, and he would always come in during a bit

where they were [*Goons* impression], and he'd say, "Something wrong with the set old boy?" I'd say, "No, it's just the way they are." But it was my own discovery, and it was kind of illicit, and of course the boys at school loved *The Goons*, we all had our favourite characters, we would reprise the jokes we'd heard the night before. And I think it was just the freedom to do silliness, to do all kinds of different jokes, and to play with the form of radio. I mean for instance someone knocks on a door, and, "Hello, who's that?" "It's me, Minnie," or something, "Let me in." "Oh, go and get the key." And then 30 seconds would be walking upstairs, getting the key, then 30 seconds while they come down and then unlocking the door, just brilliant, you know one minute of people just going up and down stairs, no jokes, no songs, nothing like that. I thought this was just so liberating to the extreme.

DW: In *Ripping Yarns* there were nine stories, you played lots of different characters. Were you really refining your craft as an actor in sustaining characters?

MP: Well, I think that, I always think you know *Python* was a great acting school, we had to play so many characters on *Python*, usually very quickly and all often very different. So *Python* was, I was, people tend to forget that *Python* was acting, but it was. And the *Ripping Yarns*, yes, I was able to try and flesh out some of the characters, and I was able to play leading characters like Eric Olthwaite, you know the most boring man in Yorkshire. And I remember Terry, Terry Jones, who wasn't in, he was just in one of the *Yarns* - for various reasons we you know decided that I would do the acting and we'd do the writing together - saying, "Well you've written yourself the most boring parts. In a sense you are the central figure, but the really, the mad characters are sort of spinning off around you." And I think there was a certain amount of truth in that, and I felt that I was having to be the controlling figure who was taking it all very seriously so that the people around, and all of the outrageous acting around it could work. A bit like Graham did so brilliantly in *Brian* and in *Holy Grail*.

DW: So we're going to come on now to a little-known show called *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, and we're going to start with some clips.

[Clip plays]

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[Applause]

So what was it like taking your partnership with Terry, the two of you into now a group of six?

MP: Well, we were all treading on new ground. We weren't quite sure - just because we all loved each other's material - that we'd actually be able to produce material ourselves that would all work, so it was a little bit tentative. But it kind of just took off fairly quickly, I mean John was writing with Graham, I was writing with Terry, Eric was writing on his own, Terry Gilliam was doing his animations. And we'd sort of get together and have a general idea of what we might want to do, which was just anything, anything you know. That was the first thing about *Python*, anything goes. So let's go away and write and you can bring anything to the table, it doesn't matter if it's got a beginning, a middle, an end, if it's lacking a tagline, we've got Terry Gilliam's animation to take us round there. So it was a very sort of wide brief we went away with, and we all brought in material that kind of clicked together. John and Graham writing the slightly more structured sketches like the Dead Parrot and things like that. Terry Jones and myself playing around with a bit of whimsy and silliness, and lots of little film clips. And Eric a lot of word play. Gilliam, doing of course the animation, which I think was the coolest thing about *Python*, was very smart and clever, but immaculate.

DW: It makes it very distinctive as well.

MP: Yeah, yeah. And that enabled us to, sort of, tie together all sorts of things that would not normally have gone together.

DW: Were you given complete creative freedom?

MP: Yeah. I mean the BBC didn't know what to make of us at all; I'm quite surprised we ever got the programmes on air. We went to this meeting with Michael Mills, God rest his soul, who was the head of comedy, and we were sat around this table, and he asked us fairly leading things like, "What's the title of your programme?" and we couldn't answer, we didn't, we hadn't thought of that. "Well I mean, will you have guest stars, guest comedians?" "Guests? Will we? I don't think we will." "And music, music, we'll have musical interludes?" All the things that were on

television had music in them. "No we hadn't thought of that." So we you know, as far as we were concerned it was the world's worst job interview. And then Michael Mills looked at us and said, "Alright, I'll give you 13 shows, but that's all." I mean, God, can you imagine? We wanted to chisel those words on the walls you know, you never hear that nowadays. But the BBC was so all-powerful then, it had two channels, ITV one channel, and they said, well, I think largely because of John who was you know obviously a great performer and a very successful performer, "We'll give these guys a chance, but we'll put them on very late at night, and if something else more important overruns we'll take them off." Like Horse of the Year show always overran, and they always took *Python* off for some reason. So I mean I remember one episode we did our own Horse of the Year show in someone's flat somewhere. And so we were allowed to carry on under the radar for about two and a half series.

DW: So you're given complete creative freedom. How does that affect you know your approach to writing sketches, because seemingly you can write a sketch about any single thing you want to do?

MP: Well, what it meant was that we were the sole judges of our own material. I mean Ian MacNaughton was our director, and Ian obviously sort of had to direct the show, he had ideas about what worked and what didn't work, but mainly it was just, it was our self-censorship. We looked at the material and if it was really funny and we all laughed, went on one pile. If it was quite funny and needed improvement by someone else in the writing group, the writing team, that went on another pile. And then there were just things that might work later, so we were sort of aware I think of making the right decisions ourselves. And we were quite a, we were quite polite to each other, but at the same time nothing really got through unless you had at least four people splitting their sides when it was first read.

DW: And if there was tension between the group, who was that normally between?

MP: Well, John and the others really.

[Laughter]

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No that's not entirely fair. There were differences, I mean I think Terry and myself were sort of rather journeyman writers, we would churn the stuff out, we were very good friends, we'd spend a lot of time together. But John and Graham were writing together, but John was doing the bulk of the writing, although Graham I think probably had the maddest ideas you know. I'm sure the parrot wouldn't have been a Norwegian Blue unless Graham had sort of suggested that. But Graham would do a lot of thinking and not say very much for a bit, and I think John got a little bit frustrated by this. And John and Eric had lifestyles, how can I say it, they were slightly more complicated. You know they wanted to go on holidays in Barbados and all that, rather more than Terry and myself who were just happy going to have a pint at the pub and all that. So they were stars and we weren't basically, and the trouble with stars is they can be a bit difficult. So there were difficulties every now and then between those who had higher expectations of life, and those of us at the humbler end of the writing spectrum.

DW: I mean I didn't actually get to see the TV series probably until it was repeated in the eighties, and I remember just being completely blown away, thinking, "I've absolutely no idea where these ideas come from." And I'm going to show a little compilation of some of my favourite bits that I remember sitting in my bedroom watching in the eighties.

[Clip Plays]

[Applause]

MP: Good choice if I may say so. The fish-slapping dance, the wonderful, brilliant thing about that is John is so funny with the actual big fish. He could have just hit me, but instead he remembers that it's also a military exercise, so he raises it you know as he's been taught at Sandhurst. And then thwack, and a really good thwack, and then he stands there with it like it's in the present fish position, I think that's just so brilliant.

DW: So was there improvisation when you filmed sketches?

MP: Well the sheep one was clearly, no one could have written that, and just about everything went wrong with it. So when things went a little bit wrong we had to

improvise. Generally speaking there wasn't a lot of improvisation because, you know what it's like, you've got to make a television show, the camera's got to know where you are, and it's not like nowadays where you have very fluent camera movements and handheld, and they can follow you wherever you're going. They had to know exactly; camera one had to know you were doing that line on camera one, camera two had to know you were doing that line, and camera three, camera four for the wide shot, camera three for holding it up, whatever. So everything had to be kind of quite well worked out, otherwise you'd miss little jokes. But we, yeah I mean things like, "Go back to my place," I think that's something we made up. Interesting you should choose those things because I'm sure that was made up at the time.

DW: What's interesting, it's also very naturalistic in your performance style, because a lot of *Python* is quite extreme, isn't it, and some of the performances are quite big performances, but that is just perfectly natural.

MP: Yeah, well I like that when things are played absolutely straight and seriously, that's when you get the best comedy. That's why, Graham Chapman was superb at that, Graham never looked like a comedian in any shape or form, nor did John particularly, but John, he quickly got the idea. But Graham could play with that intensity, and I think the way he played Arthur, and the way he played Brian were just brilliant - sustained throughout the entire film this character who was put upon, who didn't want to be doing what he was doing, didn't want to be abused by these Anglo-Saxon peasants, didn't want to be, you know, told that he was the Messiah, "I'm not the Messiah. Fuck off." "How shall we fuck off oh Lord?" You know, Graham dealt with it all, there was never a moment where he thought it was remotely funny what he was doing, and that made it so funny.

DW: And yeah he really took, he really made the films make emotional sense as well because your properly went on a journey with those characters. In creating the films, what was your main ambition as a group as a point of difference to the TV series?

MP: It was sort of a second chance. The television series had ground to a halt really

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halfway through the third series. John wasn't happy any longer really and wanted to go off and do his own thing, which turned out to be *Fawlty Towers*.

DW: And how did that conversation come about?

MP: Well, he just would sort of, you could just tell. He wasn't producing, he and Graham were not producing the absolute sort of gold star material they were in the first two series, and then you know he couldn't make a meeting here and couldn't make a meeting there, it was clearly, I just felt he was going off the whole group thing. And there was no point in trying to force people to be part of the group, that wasn't, Python didn't work on contracts like that, it worked on material. The material ceased to be funny, there was some problem. So we all went our different ways. And then I think there was just the idea, probably driven I think by Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam, and to a certain extent myself, that we should have a go at film. Because Terry, the two Terrys, particularly loved movies, and obviously you can tell from what they've done since that they were good at directing and all that sort of thing. John and Graham were never that interested, they were interested in writing and sort of a bit of performing, but you know they'd rather do the sketches in the studio and that was that. So I think it was driven by Terry Jones and myself in a sense. I mean we had written a sketch about someone going up to the walls of the castle and asking, the coconuts and all that, and that was just a sketch, it happened to be lying there on a pile. And we got this out again and thought, "Well maybe, this is Middle Ages, this could be Arthurian, yes, Arthur's knights," and suddenly it came together that what we could do with *Holy Grail*, was we had a kind of story that could be anything, the search for the Holy Grail could be anything, gave us all star parts as knights, and suddenly we'd hit upon something which could be basically a sketch show, but apparently about some you know ancient quest, and it all fell together seemingly easily, but it was not easy to do.

DW: And something else was happening at the same time, which is *Python* had gone from being a sketch show to being a phenomenon, particularly in the US. And so did that drive the idea of making movies, was it a chance then for the films to be released in America?

MP: Yeah I think that's a good point, I'd not actually sort of seen them just like that, but certainly *Python* had a sort of renaissance because of its popularity in the States. We had made a film for America called *And Now For Something Completely Different*, it didn't work. You know the American commercial networks were not going to show *Python*, nor were they going to show it in their cinemas, it was just too off the wall. In the end *Python* was picked up by Dallas Public Broadcasting in Texas, and that's where *Python* began. This guy who ran the Dallas station found some *Python* shows, took them back, the students and people there thought this is amazing, and it took off and sort of like very slow-burning fire went around the States, from Dallas to somewhere in Florida I think was the second station, and then to New York, and then to Boston, all around this public broadcasting area. And then we realised that actually it was something that meant an awful lot to the Americans, they really got excited. Not that many of them, but the people who did really found something interesting, so as you rightly say *Python* suddenly became you know a hit in the biggest market in the world, and that must have made us feel, well yes, maybe it is worth doing a film. We weren't going to go back and do any more television series, that was never really on, but we did, yeah we did decide, that gave us extra energy to do the film.

DW: And did you enjoy the reunion last year at the O2?

MP: Yeah I did yes, in the end. It was, it was nerve-wracking to start with, because in order to do it you had to hype it really, and you know the publicity and the press conferences and all that sort of stuff, and us all grinning. These ageing gits you know, smiling away. And we could have set ourselves up for a very big fall, and what was it actually going to be like when we got on stage. Physically would we be able to survive the shows you know, would we be athletic? Would we be as good as we were before, because I felt you had to be as good as before, there was no way people can say "Well they're old guys, obviously they're not as good." It had to be as good in some way. And that we didn't know until the first moment we stepped out on the stage at the O2, and it was with enormous relief that there was this great sort of charge of positive energy from the audience wanting us to have a good time, and we just, it energised all of us, I'm

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amazed really how people sort of took off. And it was like doing the sketches 40 years ago.

DW: It was joyous, but also I think the sketches do bear repeat viewing. As in when you watch 'The Argument Sketch', you don't tire of it, you know all the jokes but you can watch it again and again. There aren't many comedy sketches like that.

MP: No, that's right. And I mean 'Argument Sketch' is a wonderful formula, it's a brilliant piece of writing which I can't claim to have any responsibility for, it was a Chapman and Cleese, but it's terrific, it's a terrific sketch to do. It's like a bit of music, you know if you get just one line wrong you know it jars somehow, and John and I couldn't get it completely right, almost until the first night, I don't know if we even got it right on the first night.

DW: Oh it was perfect. What does it feel like to be in the most influential sketch group of all time?

MP: It's kind of, it's rather an odd feeling. It's like sort of something separate from myself you know. I mean I am me and I do these things, and I go shopping, and I you know pick my nose, and I sort of shave in the morning and do all these mundane things, and then suddenly people say, "What does it feel like to be in one of the most influential comedy groups ever?" and I go, "Wow. Who should I ask?"

[Laughter]

I mean it's enormously gratifying that *Python* works for people, and not of our generation. I mean that's it, there's now two generations since *Python*, and people have picked it up and enjoy it. And that's great because, I mean I was watching some of the things you'd chosen there, and I was really falling about, I still find it funny. I make no apologies about that because it was funny at the time, and I'm glad that my sense of humour hasn't suddenly sort of grown up or matured or become sort of more sort of sophisticated. It was a good, it was a, I mean *Python* had a bit of everything, that was the nice thing about it.

DW: And I really like the irreverence in which you refer to each other. You know

you do tease each other still and make jokes about each other.

MP: Yeah, absolutely. Well John goes on about my travel programmes. [yawns] He does that. I told him to put that in the show actually, when they were doing the pepper pots, and he said, "Oh yes I'll do that, I'll do that." And when he did it, it got a huge round of applause; I wish I hadn't said anything to him. And then bloody Jones starts doing it as well, I said, "Come on, hang on, hang on."

[Laughter]

DW: There were jokes about John too, wasn't there. There were jokes about his...

MP: Well about the four wives, yeah. Yes in the camp judges, yes that's right. "Is he a Mormon?" "No, no, I think it's just the way he walks."

[Laughter]

DW: So it was ten shows at the O2, and obviously you were then I imagine offered to do the show all around the world. But is it that you decided, your feeling was that the reunion was done and...

MP: Yeah. Well I, I always felt that we should do ten really good shows and then say that's it. And the scale of the shows at the O2, well it cost a lot of money. It was something like three million to stage it. And it was epic, wonderful dancers and Arlene Phillips' dancers and all that, and the music and the songs Eric had got together. I mean I can't really see that transferring easily to stages around the world, it would have taken an awful long time to get together. And I thought that actually, personally I thought and I don't think I was the only one, that actually this was probably the best we could do, and this was the right time to do it. And I think I'm borne out by the fact, I was reading John's very attractive, if slightly over-priced autobiography, so anyway, and he says at the very end, he says, "There I found myself at the O2, it was the second night and I was looking out and there were 15,000 people waiting for us to do this thing. Why couldn't I be more excited?" That's how he ends the book. And so I know, I could tell that John wasn't really keen to do a lot more, he said he would be but you know you've got enough money by then. I don't think Terry Jones particularly wanted to do

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any more, Gilliam I don't think did. So I think it was actually in the end a perfectly unified group decision not to do any more.

DW: And how did you celebrate on the last night?

MP: Well we had a party; oh we had a party yeah yeah. We had a wild party long into the night; I went home at about quarter to 11.

[Laughter]

No we had a party, at which Stephen Hawking was present, which was rather wonderful.

DW: He now just does comedy does he?

[Laughter]

MP: He just does comedy. You're going to do a series together, I know that. Matt Lucas watch out, but that was brilliant that bit, anyway.

DW: So we're going to move on now to your drama work. In the 1980s you did more acting, I'm thinking particularly about *Brazil*, where you played the evil Jack Lint. Was it part of your master plan to do more serious roles?

MP: I've never had a master plan, or even a junior master plan. I really, I would like to think I have, but I'm very much instinctive and intuitive in what I decide to do, and probably the way I do it. And throughout my career I've been very, very fortunate to be standing around trying to think what to do next when someone more forceful has come along and said, "Do this, we've got to do that." Like Robert Hewison at Oxford, and Terry Jones with the films and all that sort of thing. And Gilliam came along, and it was 1976 with *Jabberwocky*. Was it '76 or '86? No it was '76. And said, "Look, I want to make this film *Jabberwocky*, do you want to be the guy, the leading guy?" So I said, "Yeah, alright, I'll do it," and I did that, and that started a sort of relationship with Terry, which led to *Time Bandits*, which I also wrote with him. And *Brazil*, which, I was doing something else at the time, but he was determined that I should be part of it, because he's loyal and all that. And so he said, "What do you want to do?" And I looked at it and I thought Jack Lint would be brilliant. He said, I think, I just think this

will be marvellous because Mr Nice Guy being a very evil, unpleasant torturer, this could be very interesting, because torturers are not normally, you know normally portrayed as being evil men with scars and all that. But actually they're not, they're probably very nice family men who go home to their wives at the end of the day, which I think is probably true. So that was all that. The only problem came when he said, "De Niro's interested. Robert De Niro." You know, fuck me, just the greatest actor I've ever seen onscreen. "He'd like to be in the film. He's had a look, he wants to be Jack Lint." And Gilliam, it's such a lovely thing to do, he said to De Niro, "I'm sorry, you can't have that part, my friend Mike's doing that. Go off and do *Raging Bull* or something like that."

[Laughter]

No, and so he ended up playing Tuttle the plumber and was very, very, was excellent in it. But it wasn't no, wasn't a master plan, that was just *Brazil*. And then, you know whatever took my fancy at the time. I always quite liked to be surprised, I didn't want to be sort of, do something which people say, "Well obviously that's the sort of thing Michael can do." I always wanted that element of surprise.

DW: *A Fish Called Wanda* came a little later; you won a BAFTA for Best Supporting Actor. I watched it again recently; it is a brilliantly funny film, one of my absolute favourites. Is it true that when you read the script first you weren't enamoured with it?

MP: No that's apparently true because it's in my diaries. And you know when you write a diary that's what you feel on that day. And I know John was writing this and he'd asked me for help with the character I was playing, Ken Pile, because my father had a stammer, and John wanted to know what it would be like to play someone with a stammer and how he should write it. And then he sent me the script, and I just thought it looked pretty cruel, and this one particular day I remember, I just wrote down in the diary saying this seemed rather vicious and unpleasantly cruel, which of course it was. But when you've got Kevin Kline doing the scenes, he sort of took them to another level, they're absolutely hilarious.

DW: They kind of become operatic really.

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MP: Yes, absolutely, so it wasn't sort of just slightly nasty, unpleasant digs at people, it was just gross, but it a wonderful, stylish, almost balletic way.

DW: Returning to television, a breakthrough role for you was in Alan Bleasdale's *G.B.H.*, and we're going to take a look at it now.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

DW: Brilliant, brilliant. Did taking on the role feel like a risk at the time?

MP: A challenge, certainly. It was quite an interesting story to it, because I was originally asked to do the Michael Murray role, and I thought, "Wow, this is great. What a fantastic role to be offered." And then Alan came to me in a very sort of apologetic way, he said, "I think that I might change the roles round a bit. Would you mind if you were to play the Jim Nelson role?" I said, "Jim Nelson's a terrific part, of course I'd be happy to do that," but I remember being a bit disappointed because Jim Nelson was a nice guy and Murray wasn't, and I wanted to play the guy who was devious and unpleasant and duplicitous. But for various reasons the casting had, I mean he originally, I found this out later, Robert Lindsay had been asked to do it, then he'd been offered a musical in New York and said, "Sorry, I can't take it on." Then the musical hadn't happened, and he'd suddenly come back into the frame. And Alan tells me this story afterwards, he said, "You know you were so great that you took on the other part, I mean that's great," as though I'd taken on a sort of small part as a bus driver. I mean it was another huge part, so it wasn't the one I was supposed to do but it was a, it was a challenge, and it was quite difficult because a lot of Alan was in it. And I said, "I'm not Alan, Alan I'm not you. You're a Liverpudlian, very strong roots in this place." I thought of *Boys from the Blackstuff* and all that wonderful stuff that he wrote, and here I am a sort of pansy, Oxford-educated southerner coming along you know to play the role. So it was tricky to get it just right, but I think I got, I managed to put enough of my own performance into it, and Alan was very pleased in the end.

DW: And what was it like working with Robert Lindsay, did you bounce off each other?

MP: Yeah, worked very, very well. I mean Robert's great. That's an absolutely fantastic performance, and it's a bit like, you know various people in my career, I've played opposite Maggie Smith and doing sketches with Cleeve, you just know you're getting the best reactions from the best people. Something's going to be happening there, it's never going to be an ordinary day at the office, something surprising is going to happen in that take.

DW: But the last 20 years you've been saying no to many more things that you say yes to. I know because I've got some friends who are writers and directors and they've tried again and again to try and get you in things, and they've written begging letters to you. But last year you took your, took on a first leading role for about 20 years in *Remember Me*. What made you choose that project?

MP: I thought it was a terrific character, and a very odd and unusual character. A man older than myself who was charming, manipulative, devious, believable, unbelievable, a mass of strange contradictions, but at the centre of this really sort of weird, supernatural story. And I love ghost stories anyway, so I thought I'd like to be in a ghost story. But this particular character, I just felt from the moment I read it, I could do this, and I would like to do it, and it's another challenge. So I just, it didn't take me long to make my mind up. But I'd not been offered anything like that for a long time.

DW: Shall we have a look at a clip?

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

DW: And people don't realise, that was actually me in the dress there wasn't it.

[Laughter]

MP: You were trying to make me laugh, weren't you.

DW: So we move on now to another huge part of your career, quite an unexpected part of your career, which is travel documentaries. So you move from doing comedy and drama into *Around the World in 80 Days*. How did it come about?

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MP: Well I just finished *A Fish Called Wanda*, there was nothing around of comparable quality, and it was one of those limbo periods. And someone from the BBC rang up and said all this stuff about; "We've got an idea, going around the world in 80 days. You're going to be the new Phileas Fogg, camera's going to follow you everywhere. It's never been done before. You've got the wit, the skill, the imagination, the charm, the spirit of adventure to make this happen. Let me know in a week." and I rang them up you know within two minutes and said, "I'll do it." And we were about halfway round the world, in Madras as far as I can remember, on the journey when the director had had a few beers and admitted I was the fifth person they'd asked to do it.

[Laughter]

So I wasn't the first one in the frame, but I was really glad I said yes and I've never regretted it, although was again a difficult change of, it was a change of, what's the word, sort of skills one needed there, and I wasn't sure I had them to start with.

DW: Were you at all worried about revealing something of yourself that you wouldn't normally reveal in comedy sketches?

MP: Well reveal that I might be, I was very boring, just oh my God, I've got to be witty and I've got to have ad-libs aplenty here, and I wasn't particularly good at all that. And so I was worried that people might see me as a rather eccentric choice for this particular journey. And I didn't really discover how to do it until about the third programme in the series, which was when we went on the dhow. Up till that time the reviews had been pretty awful and people had said, "Why is he doing this? He's going on the Orient Express, we've seen all that before, how boring, why's Palin wasting his time on this?" The dhow journey, which wasn't supposed to happen, we got on the wrong dhow and all that, turned out to be the turning point of the series, and also it was the moment when I realised I didn't need to be an actor, I didn't need to be acting a sort of Phileas Fogg bumbling Brit abroad. I could just relate to these people, these 18 Gujarati fishermen with whom we shared our lives for eight days on this very slow boat. So you know, everything about the story and me, and me as an actor or me as a presenter went out the window, and I just lived with these guys and got to

know them slightly, and we made connections, and that has provided I think the key to all the series I've done since then. It's been about the people I've met along the way and trying to tell their story.

DW: Well let's have a look at some clips.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

MP: That one in the boat, that's a wonderful find, I'd forgotten about that, was hilarious.

DW: A real charm to the shows is that things often don't go right. So was that a definite impulse to include all of that material?

MP: Oh yeah, yeah. We sort of realised this early on when I was trying to get, I can't remember, buy a train ticket in Egypt or something like that, and it was quite clear they couldn't understand me and I couldn't understand them. I was kind of saying to the camera, "What's happening, what's going on here?" And the other time was when I was on the dhow and I just got very ill one night, and the next morning I just had to say to camera, "I hate this, I feel rotten. I feel absolutely ghastly. I just want to be at home, I want to be able to sit on a chair again." It was pathetic, it was like a little child, which is the sort of stuff that you wouldn't have heard Alan Whicker say at any point.

[Laughter]

So yes, I think it was good to acknowledge the things that went wrong.

DW: And what were the biggest challenges on taking on a series like this?

MP: Well physically there were, there was a lot of hard work. I mean *Pole to Pole* which was the second one we did, it took about, it was about four months of pretty solid travel, day in, day out, some of it right through very difficult parts of the world. So you had to be, you had to be physically quite fit, and you had to be mentally alert to take things in. And I was very, very much aware that we were a team. The cameraman was brilliant, Nigel, getting the best pictures he could. The soundman was getting the best sound. I had to be getting the best interviews and the best, making

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the, you know making things happen and being alert all the time, and being sort of on the, you know, on the go. And that sometimes was really difficult because you'd have places like Tibet, or you'd have two hours sleep a night because it was so uncomfortable, and still I had to do a day's filming the next day and make it kind of work. But I felt that always the safety net of being honest about how you feel, and if you really felt tired and you fell asleep in the middle of a take or something like that, that was fine, that was what it was all about. And I think people, I mean I think that was the attraction of the series, was that people felt, "He's just like us. This is what we would do if we were travelling in this part of the world, and I'm glad he's shown us it."

DW: Does any particular place or moment really stand out for you?

MP: Well I mean the dhow stands out, but also I mean yeah you know, meeting the Dalai Lama was quite mind-blowing, because he's a very busy man, and I'm quite surprised he had time to see us. And not only that, he kind of, as soon as he came in the room, he had done about ten interviews, and he started talking about travelling, and he said, "Oh you know I know your series, yes, I've seen your programmes on the BBC." And we started talking about travelling, and he said he's just come back from America, been doing a tour there. And I said, "Does jetlag affect you?" And he said, "Oh jetlag, yeah. Mind no, but bowels yes. 9.30 this morning I was in there..." "I'm sure that's quite enough, thank you very much."

[Laughter]

DW: And you've now moved onto making documentaries about all sorts of different subjects; transport, trains, World War One and art. And you were telling me actually about a fascinating project you're working on next.

MP: Yeah, it's another of the arts films that I've done. I've done one on Wyeth and Hammershoi and people like that. And with the same team from BBC Scotland we're doing a film about Artemesia Gentileschi, who was a 17th Century Neapolitan painter, one of the few women who was known to have painted at that time and got paid and did fantastic paintings. It's also quite an extraordinary story because

she was raped by one of her father's friends, and instead of just sort of accepting it she brought a case against him, and I think it's the first written down, recorded case of someone suing somebody for rape, and she, I think she won the case. There's a lot of, a lot of the paperwork still exists, so that will be interesting. And also she was a fantastic artist.

DW: When will we be able to see that?

MP: Well we're filming it in May, so probably the end of the year hopefully.

DW: Well we want to, before I open up questions from the audience, we've got a montage of some of your famous friends and colleagues with comments about you.

MP: Oh gosh, not that. Oh no, how embarrassing.

DW: Let's take a look.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

MP: That's it. There's a long tradition of John teasing me about things, but he wrote a wonderful thing in one of the first biographies we did, biogs, press biogs, I think it was for Holy Grail. John wrote, "Despite what he thinks, Michael is not good company."

[Laughter]

He's sort of carried on like that, but that was so funny, so funny.

DW: So we've got a few quick fire questions before the audience questions. What never fails to make you laugh?

MP: Fish.

[Laughter]

DW: Where are you at your happiest?

MP: At a fishmonger.

[Laughter]

DW: Who is the most annoying Python?

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MP: Eric, the halibut. No, there is no annoying Python, they're all annoying.

DW: Okay. Who is your favourite comedy character of all time?

MP: I think all the ones that you've done. No. I think probably Spike Milligan's somewhere there, but you know, you're a close second.

DW: Oh that's very kind. Which TV show, which TV show makes you switch off?

MP: God, which?

DW: You're too nice to say aren't you? What genre of TV are you not interested in at all?

MP: Cooking. Not really interested in cooking. *Bake Off* I'm not really interested in, and I realise there's something weird about that because the rest of the country is. But I switch off the *Bake Off*, well no, I don't switch it on, I don't switch it off, which is the point of your question, and is much more of a thing.

[Laughter]

DW: Who would play you in a biopic of your life?

MP: Well are you up for the part? You've kind of got the same grace and sort of style and spirit of adventure and charm and wit. And you're my fifth choice.

[Laughter]

DW: Okay, so now it's time for your questions, so if you've got a question for Michael please put your hand in the air and I will select you. Don't be shy, somebody has to be first. Yes Sir, there's a microphone coming to you.

Q: How many of the countries in the world have you not visited, and which ones you haven't visited would you like to visit?

MP: Who's asking the question? Oh there you are. Yes, I've not been to, I've been to fewer than half the countries in the world, I've been to 97, and I think there's something like 206. Where would I like to go

that I haven't been? I know it's sort of odd to say it at the moment being in the news, but the Pacific Islands have always fascinated me. I've been to Australia, been to New Zealand, I've never really been offshore and in through the Pacific, so I wouldn't mind doing that.

DW: Fiji? Have you been to Fiji?

MP: Fiji, oh sorry I thought you were just... No, just the way I walk.

[Laughter]

I haven't been to Fiji; I haven't been to any of those countries at all.

DW: There was a show called *Celebrity Love Island* that was from Fiji, so if you get asked to do that, you can go to Fiji.

[Laughter]

MP: That's not my way of travelling though, really. Can I do it without doing *Celebrity Love Island*?

DW: Yes, there's a gentleman down here. There's two gentlemen, but I'm going to come to you sir, and then you with the beard.

Q: What was the best *Python* sketch that never got made?

MP: Oh, well there was a very, we used to tease each other with things, and Terry Jones and I created the Vicotti Brothers, you know who used to come in and offer the army protection you know. "You've got a lot of tanks here, what if one of them was to go missing?" And we loved the Vicottis, and we kept writing little Vicotti sketches to irritate John and Graham. And one of them was 'Vicotti New Town', which was all to be set in Scotland, a part of Scotland somewhere in Glen Coe, where they were explaining how they were going to create a whole new city here once they got a few bricks and things like that, the first plan was going to be made and all that. And it was, Terry and I thought it was hilarious, it went on for some time, it never got made. And we used to tease them about what we called thesaurus sketches. You know, they'd have all the cheeses, John would get a whole list, he'd buy a book about cheeses, so we used to write lots and lots of sketches where people just went through a

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long list of things, and they never thought it was funny unless they'd written it, so there you go. But 'Vicotti New Town', I've still got the copy, it's still available if any, I'm sure there are some producers here would like to see this made, it's hilarious.

DW: Gentleman there has a question.

Q: How often do you think of your time on the dhow?

MP: How often do I think? Well, quite a lot recently because I've been doing some shows around, I did some shows around the country at the end of last year, and I've just done some in Australia and New Zealand. And the story of the dhow and what happened on the dhow comes up quite a lot, and also there was an added dimension to it because we went back, the only time I've ever been back with a camera to places we've visited before was to visit the captain of the dhow and find his village, and we found him and a lot of the people who were on the boats and this kind of 14 year-old cabin boy who's now a captain of his own in his thirties and all that sort of thing. So I've sort of waded into that quite a lot, and I do remember it. It was a very, very important episode; I mean that in the widest sense, in involving the travel series. And very quickly, an interesting thing was, it was only going to be 5 minutes, that was all we had time for in the six-hour series. And our editor, a man called Dave Thomas said, "Look, I think I can make this a bit longer, can you give me a bit more time?" And we said, "Well we've got to know by the end of the week." He said, "Alright." The end of the week, got back Friday, and Dave said, "Yeah, I think I've got it to the right length it should be," and we said, "What's that?" And he said, "55 minutes." And that's what it was, and he was the one who saw the potential. If you're going to have this long break, if it's going to take its time, you've got to show time passing; you've got to take time to introduce all these characters on the boat. Brilliant, Dave, brilliant.

DW: There's a lady there at the back. Microphone's coming to you, then we'll come to you sir.

Q: If you had to name one person that's been the most influential in your life, who would it be?

MP: My wife probably. I know, that's a bit corny but you know.

Q: That's lovely.

MP: She's very, just happens to know what I do well and what I don't do well, and she's a very stern judge. And she's here tonight, and she's frowning I can see at the moment.

[Laughter]

No, I mean that's a very interesting question. I would actually also say, and I know it's a strange thing, but this guy Robert Hewison who is now a journalist, the fact that he when we were at Oxford together, he was the one, he's my friend and said, "Look, you can do this professionally." I mean it seems a small thing but it meant a lot at the time, and started me off in Revue which really led to *The Frost Report* and led to everything I'm doing, so he's very, very important.

DW: A gentleman here has a question, the microphone's coming to you sir. Yes, just down here. Take your time, there's no rush.

MP: Yeah, no rush.

[Laughter]

DW: Just here, a gentleman here, you put your hand up sir.

Q: Thanks. If you hadn't made it as an actor, comedian, broadcaster and presenter, what alternative career would you have selected for yourself?

[Laughter]

MP: I don't know, I mean I think it would have been something to do with writing. I always enjoyed writing as much as I enjoyed acting, and I've always been diary keeping and all that sort of thing. So I think probably I did at one point think I might end up being a journalist, honourable profession, and that I think is possibly something I might have done. Hard to tell, but I think it would have been something that involved writing, and possibly advertising, something like that you know. So glad I didn't.

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DW: There's a gentleman there, the glasses. Yes you sir, you're just turning round to look behind you but there you are.

Q: Thank you. There doesn't seem to be quite so much of an interest in sketch shows on television at the moment. I just wondered what you thought that the reason for that was, particularly as there seems to be so many good comedians out there, and what sort of advice would you give the comedians and the programme-makers to make a good, new sketch series.

MP: Well, I mean you've [gestures to David Walliams] made sketch series. *The Fast Show*. And you're right, there are not a lot around, it's not a form that seems to be appealing at the moment. But I don't, I might be missing something out, but generally I think that comedy has gone more, become slightly more analytical, a little more introverted. Some of the best shows now are *The Thick Of It* and *The Office* and things like that, that are just people who can't hack it doing these strange and weird things, and just observing, comedies of observation. Whereas sketches I think you've got to sort of, it's a bit old-fashioned in a way a sketch show. And *Python* was not really a sketch show, we had the sketch format but we played around with it and all that. I would think that if you've got a team, and one of the really important things about our little group, I don't know how it happened, but we were a very strong little team and we decided this is how we wanted our comedy to be. We don't want to pin it down to one group of characters or one type of humour, let's do all sorts of things, let's pick and mix. And I think, you know there must be somebody out there who could look at that kind of formula, revisit it again, but you can't force comedy in that way. But I would think it's, I love sketch shows, I love things that really just pack the 30 minutes with all sorts of different little things and episodes and ideas and lines and all that. I don't necessarily want it to be something that starts at the beginning and smoothly goes through. But that's, you know it's a question of what people come up with really, rather than what people want.

DW: There's a gentleman there with his hand up a few rows back.

Q: Thank you. Sorry to ask you a strange one, but why do we laugh? Dogs don't laugh, cats don't laugh, as far as I know

monkeys and apes don't laugh. Is there some evolutionary purpose served by humour? Is it because we're afraid of dying? I mean what's it all about?

[Laughter]

DW: Yeah, answer us that. Why do we even laugh?

MP: Because we emulate hyenas you know, who as we know love sketch comedy and always are laughing about.

[Laughter]

I think you're probably wrong, I think maybe there's laughter there, we just don't notice it. A little worm goes along, maybe it does every now and then: "Bloody hell this is, I've got to get round this." And then comes a little tiny worm, just gets through like that, and he says "well how do you do that?" And he says, "well you know, you ask your mother-in-law", something like that. They wouldn't say it like that.

DW: It would be in worm language.

[Laughter]

MP: But I think we should get in the laboratory together and do some tests. People are very, you know there are a lot of tests which are done these days, very sophisticated, about our genes and all that. I think we should see how we can make animals laugh, apart from hyenas who are the best studio audience ever, although they don't laugh at jokes, do they.

DW: We have time for a couple more questions.

Q: I'm sorry.

DW: No I liked, I enjoyed it, but I feel...

MP: Do hyenas laugh at jokes, or do they just laugh manically? Is it sexual?

DW: I think they like, they like impressions, I think hyenas, yeah. But only of other hyenas, it's quite limited.

[Laughter]

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MP: Do an impression of a tiger, they're just not interested.

[Laughter]

DW: There's a lady there, there we are, yeah.

No, you laugh, but we are big fans of Antwerp.

Q: Hi. I was just wondering what ambitions you have for the rest of your career?

DW: Well, we heard it tonight. He's a big fan of Antwerp. They've got their front pages for tomorrow.

DW: Yeah, when are you really going to get on with it? Get stuff done.

[Laughter]

[Laughter]

So I'm going to come to this gentleman here.

MP: Well, I'm going to try and keep my teeth, you know. Keep being able to walk. You do at this stage of your life begin to think a lot more about the physical side of things really, and confronting oneself in front of the mirror every morning is quite a trial in a way. I think maybe I should just give up, but I'm not going to give up so that's, it's keeping going is what I'm going to try and do for the next ten years. If that doesn't work, I'll try something else.

Q: What would you most like to be remembered for: your comedy, your drama or travel series?

[Laughter]

MP: Oh, just remembered you know. I suppose, that's what they all say. I really don't mind. Comedy I think would be great because I think that laughing and enjoying laughter is a good thing. I love it, it always makes me feel better when I laugh. And all told it's a good thing. A man in front of you there who's the authority on animal laughter, you can go and talk to him about it. But I think laughter would be a thing I'd like to be remembered for. And probably, John [Cleese] is quite right, I think probably the best thing I ever did was the fall in the water in the fish-slapping dance. That was a good fall, and I'll tell you why, because when we rehearsed the sketch in Teddington lock, the lock was full. When we came to do the take, I'd been absorbed, suddenly I looked down and the lock was empty, there's a 15-foot drop. And I should probably have said, "No, hang on, let's wait," but by that time the music had started.

DW: You're not going to play King Lear at the RSC or anything like that?

MP: Wouldn't say no, wouldn't rule it out. Either that or taking over at QPR, I don't mind you know.

[Laughter]

[Laughter]

DW: Time for two more questions, so we'll come to this lady here next with her hand up three rows back, and then I'll come to you sir.

Q: Where do you go on holiday?

And that fall, straight into 15-feet of water, pretty good; 45 degrees, with a helmet on, big, heavy boots, absolutely dead straight was, you know you never could have choreographed that. That was, I think John's right, the high point of my career.

MP: Why do you want to know?

[Laughter]

DW: Your finest moment. We're going to come to one last question from this gentleman here.

I go to a little place; I have two keys, one on me at the moment. No, we go to France, we used to go on big family holidays you know to Disneyland and all that, now the children have grown up we tend to go to small places, to go away for sort of three or four days, five days, that's about all we can survive together really. [Laughs] European cities I quite like, not too far you know. Antwerp, we're very big fans of Antwerp.

Q: Thank you very much. Michael, you've lived an absolutely wonderful and fascinating life and lots more ahead, and I noticed that a lot has come to you and you've run with it in a whole variety, a

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whole spectrum. And I was wondering if, is there initiatives that you might like to take, I know you say your wife is your greatest influence and I can well understand, you know there's always somebody who's pushing us on. But what about yourself, is there initiative you would like to take that you haven't thus far? In other words, in terms of work or opportunity? You know you've done so much, but is there something else?

MP: Well I would still, I'd still like to write a novel and crack it and just, that is something which you have to do for yourself, no one else can push you. There are things I'd like to write about, and I love giving the imagination a chance to run out there. I would love to write another novel and just get stuff out there. If that doesn't work I don't know really.

DW: How about becoming pope, is that something you've thought about?

MP: How do you do that? Do you have to apply? You've got lots of forms?

[Laughter]

DW: I think you could go to the head of the queue, I think if they knew you wanted to be the pope.

MP: Really? That would be very nice, yeah. Can I just be pope for a bit? I'm good at kissing tarmacs, I'd be good at that.

DW: Okay, well unfortunately that's all we have time for. I just have to thank our sponsor, which was Rathbones Investment Management. Thank you so much.

MP: Thank you. No, thank you.

DW: And I just wanted to say on a personal level and I'm sure I speak for everyone here, in thanking Michael Palin, not just for tonight, but for all the enormous pleasure you have given us over so many years. Thank you very much, Michael Palin.

[Applause]

MP: I can't go without saying thank you to David who has given me an enormous amount of pleasure in his work, and also has many, many more years ahead of him than I do. But I do appreciate him coming along on a very busy time, pushing

Stephen Hawking around and all of that sort of thing, to come and talk to me tonight. It's been a great pleasure.

DW: Oh well thank you Michael, thank you.

[Applause]