

# WEST WEEKEND

SEPTEMBER 10-11 2016

hidden gem

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DISCOVERS A JEWEL  
BY THE JETTY

TAKING  
SHAPE

Designing for  
real women

WILD  
THINGS

THE JOYS  
OF SPRING

# John Cleese

The comedy legend is  
having the last laugh.

*plus »*

SWAN GOLD  
& ROAD  
WARRIORS

The Weekend West



WEST WEEKEND

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COVER JOHN CLEESE PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE

WEST WEEKEND

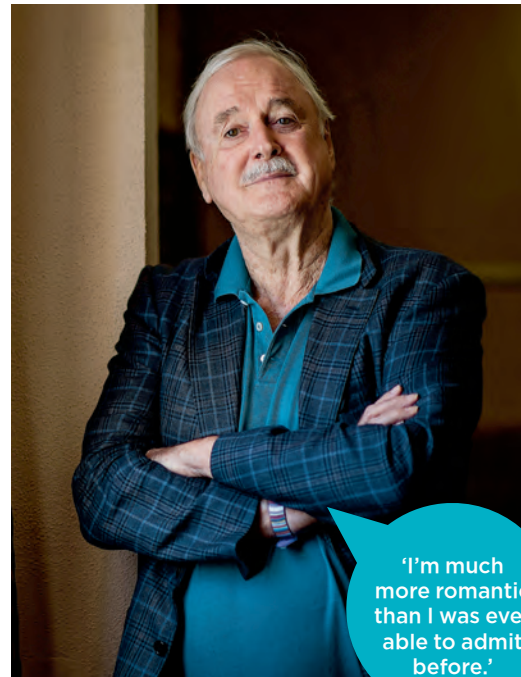
September 10, 2016

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*From the editor*

*I have many things to thank my parents for, but one is definitely a sense of humour. One of my early childhood memories is Dad playing his Goons records, mimicking the hapless Eccles. And then there was Monty Python, introduced via a bootleg tape of the Holy Grail, which Mum and Dad watched with a bunch of English mates. At the time, the funniest thing was the sight of all these grown-ups rolling about the floor laughing. But once we kids got the jokes, it wasn't long before we were all reciting the lines. The same for Fawlty Towers — we knew every episode by heart. Years later, those well-worn lines still make me (and mine) laugh out loud. What a thrill, then, to meet John Cleese. And even more delightful to find him in such an expansive mood.*



'I'm much more romantic than I was ever able to admit before.'

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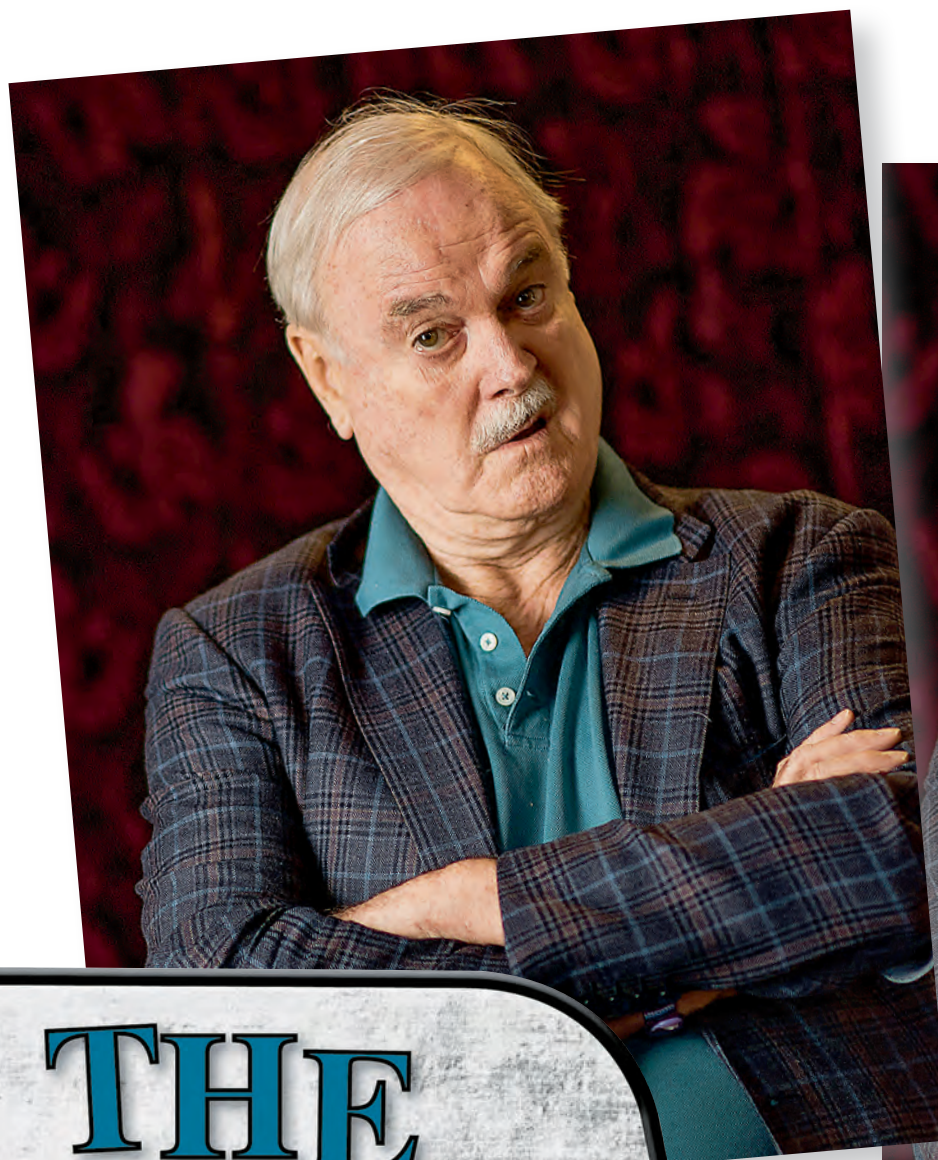
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ESTÉE LAUDER AT **MYER**



feature



# THE FULL MONTY

PICTURES IAIN GILLESPIE

He's been making us laugh for decades but John Cleese is serious about what matters. The comedy legend opens up to **Julie Hosking**.

**J**ohn Cleese is perched a little uncomfortably on a stool upstairs at the Regal Theatre. There are plenty more inviting chairs to be had but he's requested the higher seat, not because of his considerable height but because of a dodgy hip.

"The thing that made it worse was a tour I was doing in Sweden, travelling in a small van. I'm going to have to have it replaced." He seems unfazed by the prospect. "I've had it done once, it's a very good operation but it means you've got to find six weeks."

There is something rather surreal about sitting

replacements. It's a reminder of the passing of time but also an indication that Cleese doesn't give a hoot about pretending to be something he's not. Dressed casually in jeans, polo shirt and jacket, he looks every bit the genial grandfather, even if his stature as comedy legend remains undiminished.

The previous night I was playing a few of his old sketches when my 15-year-old son sat down next to me. Before long both of us – the newcomer and the long-term fan – were crying with laughter as we watched Cleese in various guises: arguing with Michael Palin's dodgy salesman about his lifeless bird in Monty Python's Dead Parrot sketch; upsetting German guests as the world's worst hotelier, Basil Fawlty, in Fawlty Towers; and simply reading his famous Bookshop sketch with fellow Python Eric Idle in front of a live audience to promote his 2014 memoir *So, Anyway*.

Cleese seems genuinely chuffed that someone more than 60 years younger than him – he turns 77 next month – would find any of his work funny,

opposite one of the world's comic geniuses, a man whose hilarious skits were such a part of growing up you can recite them ad nauseam, and discussing hip

particularly pieces that first came out almost 50 years ago. "Really? That's marvellous," he says, before peppering me with questions about where I grew up. He may be in town to talk up the stage adaptation of his beloved TV series Fawlty Towers, which opens at the Regal later this year, but he's clearly not one to stick to script.

In a conversation that covers everything from his love for his fourth wife's ex-husband to his contempt for US presidential hopeful Donald Trump, the comedian is forthright but friendly, happy to answer any question and proffering unsolicited asides. When he loses his thread, he apologises for being tired, having done a string of radio interviews since he arrived in Perth. Then there was all the media in the lead-up to the world premiere of Fawlty Towers Live in Sydney a week earlier.

Given he also loathes flying, coming to Australia must be a bit of a drag. Not so, he demurs. "I love coming here, I feel ridiculously at home, particularly in Sydney where I've spent more time. London has changed a lot; it doesn't feel as English as it used to and this is not a complaint against immigrants at the lower end of the scale ... it's the hugely rich people. I was told yesterday about a woman who bought a house for £39 million (\$68 million) and spent £15 million (\$26 million) on it! And she was the sister of the guy who runs Kazakhstan."

He launches into a scathing assessment of Russian oligarchs – "a bunch of scoundrels" – and the Middle





East's uber-wealthy who he believes have scant regard for the cultural fabric of the society they have bought into. "It filters down because people are after their money, so they open shops that sell handbags instead of having interesting shops; they want designer labels and they want handbags and they want cars," he says. "The world is being taken over by the rich and I don't think the rich are particularly nice or happy people."

But you had plenty of money once, didn't you? "I was very, very comfortable, yes. When I met Alyce Faye (Eichelberger)," referring to his third wife, who famously won a \$20 million divorce settlement he only recently finished paying off, "I had a big house in Holland Park in a leafy part of London with a garden and no mortgage and now I have an 1100-square-foot flat near Sloane Square with a mortgage. How the mighty fall." He laughs, without any trace of the bitterness detectable in interviews in the immediate aftermath, when he embarked on the Alimony Tour to pay for the divorce. "But I was never that mighty or that rich and what I've found is that it doesn't really make that much difference. The thing about money is it makes life less stressful ... And you can eat better food and drink better wine, and probably travel more. But I'd never known where my money was invested because it was of no interest to me."

Perhaps because he grew up without all that much. John Marwood Cleese was born on October 27, 1939, in the Python-sounding town of Weston-

super-Mare, Somerset. His father Reginald, who changed his name from Cheese when he was in the army, was an amiable insurance salesman who earned "£30 a week at the height of his powers, which was in the mid-50s, when a miner was getting £10". His mother Muriel was a difficult woman who lived in "a constant state of high anxiety bordering on incipient panic". In his memoir, Cleese attributes his failed relationships with women and years of therapy to his mother.

So tall by the age of 12 that his sports teacher described him as "six foot of chewed string", the lad's awkwardness was exacerbated by the number of times his parents moved after the war. "I didn't have many real friendships when I was a boy," he says. "For some reason and I don't know why, I always just wanted to make people laugh as much as possible."

Humour was a way in, then? "Oh yeah, (the late comedian) Peter Cook always said that but I started to think about it more and I think it was a way of being accepted. But it was never with any thought of doing it professionally because people from Weston-super-Mare didn't do that! You didn't expect them to say they were going to be the pope, or I'm going to be a matador, or an astronaut or a comedian. It wasn't on the radar. It was an accountant or lawyer."

Cleese taught at his old school – years he describes as some of the happiest of his life – before heading to Cambridge to study law. It didn't take him long to fall in with the university's fabled Footlights theatre troupe, where fellow alumni included Tim Brooke-Taylor and Bill Oddie (*The Goodies*), as well as future writing partner and Python Graham Chapman.

On graduating, he found work with BBC Radio as a sketch writer but it was on TV's *The Frost Report* where his reputation as both writer and performer was cemented. By the time Monty Python formed in 1969, he had by far the biggest profile.

Python's anarchic nonsense influenced generations of comics and writers, from Tina Fey and Martin Short to the creators of *The Simpsons*, and developed a cult following in the US after a five-year stint on British TV. The buzz prompted the group to move into films, including Monty Python and the Holy Grail, *Life of Brian* (financed by long-term fan, Beatle George Harrison), and *The Meaning of Life*.

With sidelines in writing books on psychology and making training videos, Cleese also found himself in demand as an actor, on the big screen and as a big-name guest on hit American sitcoms (*3rd Rock from the Sun*, *Will & Grace*). Perhaps his finest film »

*I don't think the rich are particularly nice or happy.'*



# feature

« post-Python is the 1988 smash-hit *A Fish Called Wanda*, which he also co-wrote. He agrees. “It took \$200 million. I made two really good films, that and *Life of Brian*. I think *Holy Grail* the first half is very, very good, but it gets a bit stodgy after that.”

Cleese says he got to a point some time ago where he decided not to take everything so personally, though he has the perfect platform in 5.4 million Twitter followers when he feels like firing off, as he did about a less than flattering review of *So, Anyway*. “I don’t want Professor Wilson to call me self-obsessed again so when the (Daily) Mail pays him to do another hatchet job ... he’s going to find that I’ve written the second part of my autobiography about someone else.” *Touche*.

“When you’re young, you want everyone to think you’re funny,” he explains. “But as you get older you discover that, first of all, there’s nothing you can do about the fact that some people are going to dislike you, whoever you are, and the other thing is that you don’t pay much attention to critics any more. The extraordinary thing about critics is they can’t do it: they can’t write, they can’t act, they can’t direct and yet they criticise people who can.”

Cleese reserves much of his venom for elements of the British press, which he says wouldn’t be read by anyone with “a quarter of education”. “People are so addicted to gossip, which again is a sort of triviality,” he says. “I mean, why would anybody want to know the name of Burt Reynolds’ cat? And yet there are people who do know this stuff! As far as I’m concerned they’re barking mad.”

Given his somewhat depressing assessment of his home town, I wonder why he still chooses to live there. “Well, my friends are there. But Jenny and I are getting so fed up with the weather – we’re looking at a place to base ourselves where there is a lot of sun.”

Cleese’s eyes light up when he talks about his fourth wife, Jennifer Wade, whom he married in 2012. You would think a man thrice married, and left hideously scathed by the last experience, would never be tempted again but the comedian was smitten the minute he met the British jewellery designer, who is 31 years his junior. “I’m much more romantic than I was ever able to admit before,” he says. “Basically we took one look at each other and we both went away and said to another person ‘I think I’ve met the one’. And that was a five-minute conversation in the city.”

They weren’t destined to be together immediately, though. Cleese was off on tour and Jenny, who he calls Fish “because she swims like an Australian”, was in the process of breaking up with her husband. “He’s now a really good friend of ours and he’s now my PA. Really – and I love him to bits! And of course he knows my wife; he knows that she’s mad, he knows that I’m mad, and it’s a tremendously good arrangement. He still loves her and she loves him. They just weren’t good as a couple.”

A bit like Cleese and first wife Connie Booth, I suggest. “Yeah, that’s right. It’s a really good friendship and it’s so nice when you can do that.”

It was with Booth that he co-wrote *Fawlty Towers*,



one of comedy’s most loved TV series. She played waitress Polly, the frustrated artist who tries to hold things together at the Torquay hotel on the “English Riviera” while Cleese’s Basil Fawlty trips from one disaster to the next. The couple, whose daughter Cynthia was born in 1971 (his daughter Camilla with his second wife is a comedian who regularly makes a meal out of her father’s relationships), had divorced before they finished the second series in 1979. There were only 12 episodes in all and, despite many requests, they were never tempted to make any more.

“It took Connie and I six weeks to write an episode and we didn’t even start the dialogue until we’d got the plot, which was usually 2½ weeks,” he says. “If we’d tried to do it again, it wouldn’t have been quite as good and what’s the point?”

He chose to launch the stage adaptation, which stars an all-Australian cast and links material from three of the most quoted episodes, in Australia because of its air of optimism. How does his co-creator feel about it? “She doesn’t have a great deal of interest in it but she’s very pleased,” he says. “When she came out of show business, she just dropped it cold turkey. She’s been a therapist for 30 years and has just retired. I emailed her a couple of days ago and said it’s gone much better than I expected and the cast is really marvellous. And she said ‘Well that’s lovely’. And of course she’ll pick up some very nice royalties.”

As for the enduring popularity of *Fawlty Towers* and Monty Python, Cleese says the reason is simple. “It’s the complete silliness – it’s not in any way socially relevant, except in that there are certain personality types who seem to exist in every era. But when you take the Dead Parrot sketch, it’s silly, of course it’s silly, but it’s also terribly funny. There’s nothing in there to date it and I realised recently how lucky we were that our two best films were set in historical periods, because they don’t date.”

Monty Python, minus Chapman who died in 1989, reunited for 10 shows at the O2 Arena in London in July 2014 – the first sold out in 44 seconds – a feat that



**Stepping out** (clockwise from above) Cleese in *Fawlty Towers*; Blazey Best and Stephen Hall play Sybil and Basil on stage; with Michael Palin at the Monty Python reunion show; with fourth wife Jennifer Wade.

prompted a delightful parody promo from fellow septuagenarian Mick Jagger. “Who wants to see that again, really? It’s a bunch of wrinkly old men trying to relive their youth and make a load of money.”

Cleese is off to rejoin Idle next month for a tour down the west coast of America and then into Arizona and Texas. The double act, which came to Perth earlier this year, arose out of that hilarious book “interview” in LA in 2014. “It was so much fun that he and I quite separately went off and thought about it and about four months later, contacted each other and said ‘Well, if it was that much fun why don’t we do a show because the audience liked it.’” And what can be better, he argues, than making people laugh.

While Cleese is clearly in a happy place these days, he is still despairing of the world at large. “If you ever think the world is going to be organised into a nice, relatively unselfish state I think the answer is absolutely not,” he says.

“There’s a very funny and interesting American book by Aaron James called *Assholes* and it’s a study of the asshole. The obvious example is Trump – there’s a man with no real empathy for anyone; he’s only interested in getting the maximum amount of prestige for his ego, and assholes by definition have an enormous sense of entitlement. There’s a lot of people in charge at the moment just like that.”

On that less than cheery note, our time is up. “Are you happy,” he asks, before heading off to pull an array of ludicrous faces on cue for the photographer. “Got everything?” I hesitate before asking if he’d sign my partner’s well-worn copy of Monty Python’s *Flying Circus*. “Of course I will,” he says, “what’s his name?” I look inside later where he’s inscribed: “Norman, hope this still makes you laugh!” You can count on that. **WW**

**Fawlty Towers Live is at the Regal Theatre, November 17-December 4, ticketek.com.au.**