



## PROFILE

# THE LIFE OF TERRY

*He's been called a maverick and master of surrealist cinema, but film director Terry Gilliam tells Madeleine Collins he's still just learning*

**"I**t felt like I was working for the devil." Terry Gilliam is clearly in no mood to mince words. "The Weinsteins have done more damage to peoples' films than anyone else on the planet, and I had less interference than others."

Gilliam delivers this stinging attack on Miramax Films' owners Harvey and Bob Weinstein in his gentle American brogue but the intent is clear. He is talking about his 2005 film *The Brothers Grimm* – "produced by 'the brothers grimmer'" he smirks – which starred Heath Ledger and Matt Damon as the legendary duo, and which tanked big time at the box office.

The fact that Gilliam is publicly bad-mouthing two of the most influential and powerful figures in the film industry is pertinent proof of his lack of fear for

Hollywood's studio system, and the loathing of compromise that has defined his intriguing career.

*The Brothers Grimm* may long have been consigned to the vault of box office flops but the link to today is of course, Heath Ledger. It was during Gilliam's latest project, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* that Ledger died of an accidental prescription drug overdose, last January.

The film is currently in post production and slated for release in March 2009, when it will at last be unveiled exactly how Gilliam engineered Ledger's leading role into one which is now played in three other versions by Johnny Depp, Jude Law and Colin Farrell.

The result will perhaps be the biggest test to date for the director who is renowned as the one of the masters of surrealist cinema,

thanks to visual masterpieces including *Brazil*, *Time Bandits* and *Twelve Monkeys*.

I meet Gilliam at the Dubai International Film Festival where he has come to receive the Lifetime Achievement Award. He is dressed in the standard film director attire of tan cargo pants and matching sandals and long sleeved black t-shirt. He sports a greying thatch and beard, and now, a broad smile.

"Take chances, never compromise and never apologise," he answers to my question of how on earth he got away with creating both some of the most sizeable box office disasters ever, and some of the most visually experimental and fascinating films in cinematic history.

Unconventional, risky and mad are all adjectives penned by critics to describe Gilliam's films – most of which he wrote as well as directed. His self-confessed obsession with time travel crops up in most of his projects – "you're time traveling every time you enter a cinema – you enter another time and place" – as does a fantasy element.

Born in Minnesota, USA, Gilliam got his first taste of Hollywood when his family relocated to Los Angeles when he was aged 12. He attended Occidental College in LA – as did Barack Obama – but soon followed his creative nose to New York, where he worked as an illustrator and cartoonist.

It was here that he first met British actor John Cleese, with whom he would later collaborate to create the Monty Python comedy troupe.



"We were looking for actors who would work for \$15 a day," he says of his work creating photographic strips for the magazine *Help!* – and Cleese fit the bill.

The two later met in London (where Gilliam emigrated in 1967) and teamed up with other future Pythons Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin.

"At the time, the BBC wanted to give Cleese his own show, but he wanted the whole gang" chuckles Gilliam. And so Monty Python was born. Gilliam worked as actor, writer and animator for the series, and says he was given free reign to create his eccentric visual images

The troupe's first feature film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which Gilliam co-directed with Terry Jones, was released in 1975 and instantly became a cult classic.

A year later, he embarked on his first solo project, *Jabberwocky*, which was based on the Lewis Carroll poem. "It was sold as Python film and failed rather miserably," concedes Gilliam. And so he returned to comedy roots to co-write and animate the second Python flick, *The Life Of Brian*.

But it was *Time Bandits*, the time traveling tale of a journey through history by a small boy accompanied by dwarves, that really made Hollywood sit up and notice of Gilliam.

Next came his most celebrated work to date. *Brazil* tells the story of Sam Lowry, a civil servant who is mistakenly branded a terrorist by the state. The futuristic tale transports Lowry to a fantasy world where he pursues the woman of his dreams as his world spins further into destruction.

The ambitious project was released in 1985, and Gilliam says he got away with *Brazil* being so dark because *Time Bandits* was so successful. "If you can convince Hollywood you've got the golden touch, they're more willing to hand over cash." It also helped, he says, having Beatle George Harrison – who mortgaged his office building to pay for the prints and advertising – as one of the producers.

Gilliam likens *Brazil's* plot line of the "wrong guy arrested" to the current situation in Guantanamo Bay. "It's interesting how life imitates art," he smiles wryly. "The world doesn't change – it just reinvents itself again and again. I heard that half of the audiences walked out of the film, it was that ahead of its time."

He calls *Brazil* a documentary because "everything in it was happening then." It's the same now, he says. "People I meet tell me they assume the film is about their country but invariably I've never been there, so it clearly resonated."

Box office receipts were moderate, but accolades were plenty, including an Oscar nomination for Gilliam's screenplay.

Gilliam was on a roll, but his next venture, *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, in 1988, famously lost millions. Fortunately, it was followed by the critically acclaimed *The Fisher King* three years later. The dark exploration of the relationship between Jeff Bridges and Robin Williams' characters veered away from Gilliam's usual quest for visual spectacle and interestingly, it was the first film he directed in which he was not involved in writing the screenplay.

He walked away with the Best Director Golden Globe for *The Fisher King*, but it was another four years before he delivered his next film.

*Twelve Monkeys*, a sci-fi epic, turned out to be an unusual star vehicle for Gilliam, thanks to Bruce Willis and rising star Brad Pitt. "Bruce got it made," he says matter-of-factly. Pitt, says Gilliam "had been simmering under at the time", but when *Legends of the Fall* was released and Pitt was catapulted to heartthrob status, it changed everything.

When he first read the script Gilliam says he was enthralled but his first impression was that it was "too strange, weird, intelligent and wonderful" to ever get made. The film turned out to be his biggest box office hit to date and Pitt won the Golden Globe award for his role.

Gilliam next began production on *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a film adaptation of Hunter S. Thompson's mind-bending 1971 novel, starring Johnny Depp. "It was all about the dreams of the 60s, and the failure of those dreams," he muses. "I was pursued for ten years to do the project and it turned out to be strangely, one of the most influential films I've ever done."

The majority of critics, however, loathed the film and it bombed against Godzilla at the box office. But big hairy monsters were of little concern to Gilliam. "Mine and Johnny's only fear was that Hunter wouldn't like it," he says, describing his commitment to staying true to the book. Thompson gave it the thumbs up and that was good enough for the director.

Gilliam's intriguing and eclectic body of work has garnered some other influential fans. JK Rowling originally wanted him to direct *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in 2001, but the powers that be at Warner Brothers studios opted for the safer bet of Chris Columbus, who had directed other family favourites *Home Alone* and *Mrs Doubtfire*.

Gilliam instead traveled to Spain to film *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, which starred Johnny Depp and Jean Rochefort. Filming collapsed almost immediately due to Rochefort's health problems and the fact that the entire set was destroyed by flash floods. The debacle resulted in the hilarious

documentary *Lost In La Mancha*.

"We were struggling to get the film made and within five days it was all over," he recalls. At the time he'd asked the same crew who documented the making of *Twelve Monkeys* to do the honours for *Don Quixote*. When things started going wrong, they were bemused, he says, "but I just told them, 'shut up and keep shooting. This is drama and disaster – you have the better film!'"

"I was busy hiding behind a rock," he goes on. "I walked out in the desert knowing I deserved to be punished for everything. Then I came out from behind that rock and the whole set was washed away. You have to howl with laughter at the wonder of what nature can do."

Next came *The Brothers Grimm*, derided by the most influential film critics and even fans of Gilliam's surreal adventures as "gorgeous but empty" and "style in search of a purpose".

This was swiftly followed by *Tideland*, a fantasy gothic fairytale dubbed "way too disturbing for kids and too weird for most grown-ups," by *Variety* magazine. The film sank without trace and would herald yet another three year hiatus for Gilliam.

And so to *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*. Gilliam is reticent to talk about Ledger today and, as in the majority of his work, clearly the thrill will be in the surprise.

Of his return to the time travel theme for the film, Gilliam says: "I don't want to limit reality. The world is so desperate for facts, so I push it. I need to find out for myself what is real and what is impossible. Being a cartoonist you see things in a peculiar way, but everything I do is thought out and I spend so much time on detail. Everything is real and justifiable. It may be nonsensical but you have to believe it."

And of the multiple obstacles along his filmmaking journey: "It's all about perseverance and knocking on doors. Most of my life is spent trying to raise money to get films made."

Case in point; seven years after the *Don Quixote* fiasco, and after a huge legal struggle, Gilliam has finally retained the original script, and is planning to remake it. He was pedantic about getting the original version back. "Then when I got it and read it I realised 'Okay, now we need to rewrite it!'" he says, roaring with laughter.

"Maybe I wasn't ready for it – for the pretend Quixote," he goes on with a sly smile. "Now it's time for the real one."

And, then, with a glint in his eye: "I'm just an old fart still trying to learn to make movies. That's why I love what I do – the wonder is that it never ends and you feel like a student and a novice each time." 🐼