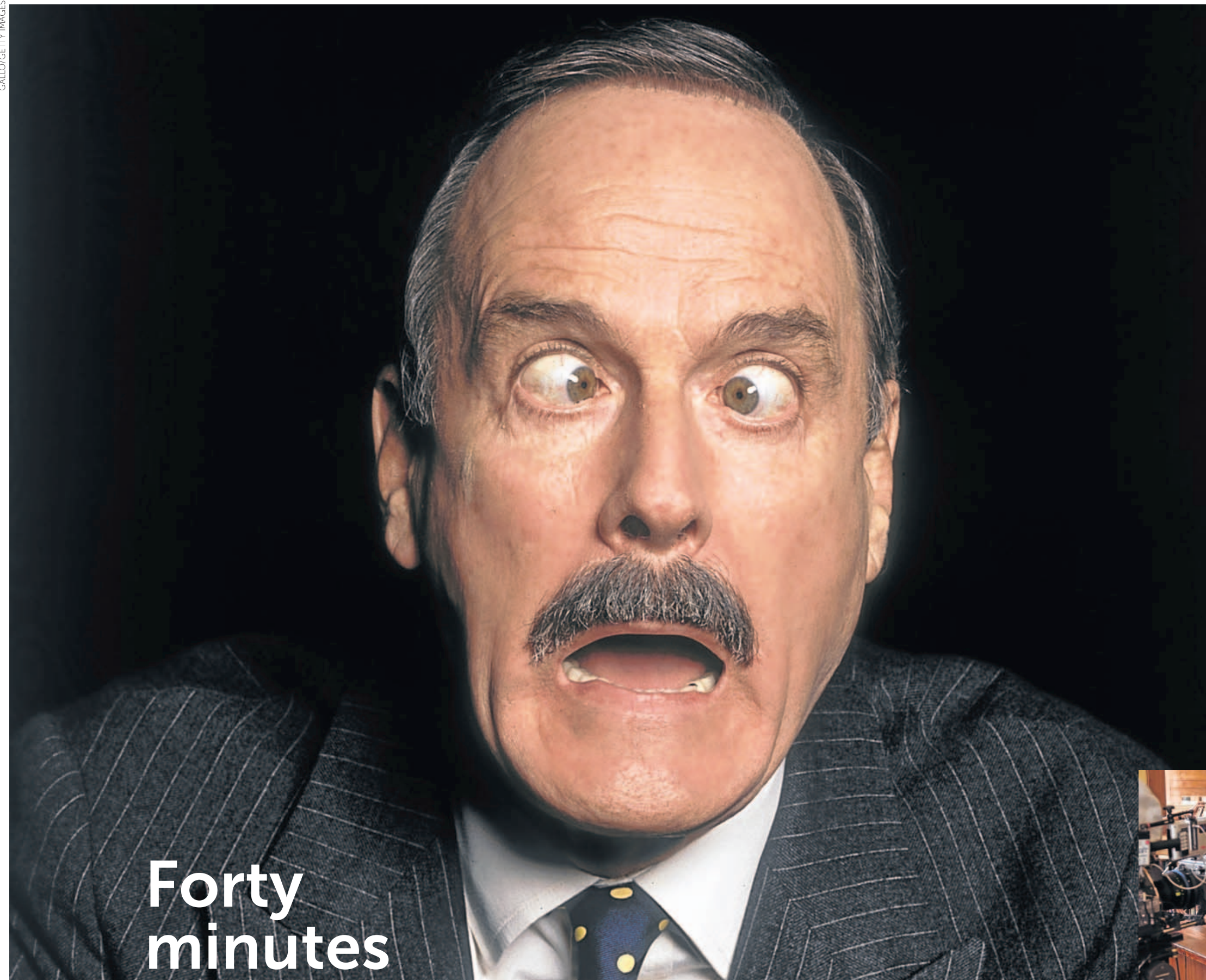


GALLO/GETTY IMAGES



Forty minutes with

Mr Funny

John Cleese has inspired and endured the deep art of clever silliness for decades. He talks to *Oliver Roberts* about fame, God, and the dark side of creativity

IT'S a strange time, those few seconds waiting for John Cleese to pick up the phone. You've been given the number of his English home, told to ring at 1.30pm, and now you're sitting alone in an insipid boardroom — ring-ring-ring — waiting for him to answer.

Normally, you don't give a damn about celebrities. The prospect of an interview with famous people has become passé and years of doing it has taught you a valuable lesson: that the well-known are generally no more interesting to speak to than "normal" people.

But this is John Cleese. John Ministry-of-Silly-Walks-Dead-Parrot-Don't-Mention-the-War Cleese. Mad, comedic genius who launched a thousand catch phrases and generations of dreadful imitators. He of the long legs and bowler hat; one of the men answerable for inventing multi-layered silliness.

"Hello..." answers the unmistakable voice.

Unmistakable in that it sounds just like Basil Fawlty. Resigned. A little weary. You imagine him behind the reception desk at Fawlty Towers, loosely apologising to an offended guest while slapping Manuel around the head. You try not to laugh.

"Is that Mr Cleese?"
"Yes it is. How are you?"
Cleese is coming to Joburg and Cape Town in October as part of his world *Alimony Tour*. So called because, at age 71, he's had to go on the road again in order to make enough money to cover part of his divorce settlement with American psychotherapist Alyce Eichelberger. The amount is \$1-million a year for the next four years. Clearly he was very astute regarding the marital allure of lemurs. Cleese is a lover of the saucer-eyed primates and once said: "I adore lemurs. They're extremely gentle, well-mannered, pretty and yet great fun. I should have married one."

Despite the acrid reasons for Cleese having to return to the stage, he seems to be enjoying it. His Twitter page is awash with photographs of dressing rooms and airports and messages of thanks to his followers (he calls them his "loyal, loving, beautiful, Twittering Twats").

South African fans saw Cleese recently in *Spud* as headmaster Mr "The Guv" Edly. He says making the film was one of the best moments of his career. "*Spud* was an extraordinarily good experience. The part for the headmaster was such a beautiful piece of writing, Troy (Sivan) is an extraordinarily gifted actor, (director)

Donovan Marsh has a very good mind and John van de Ruit is absolutely delightful. I can't really think of a nicer group to work with. And when I came out for the premier, I was very touched by it. I had tears in my eyes several times.

"The only person who didn't enjoy the experience was my lovely girlfriend (Jennifer Wade), who was bitten to smithereens by the mosquitoes. She had 183 bites. She's very pretty and I told her mosquitoes don't attack ugly people like me."

You imagine Cleese at the movie's opening, being repeatedly approached by people who, even in polite conversation, try their luck and ask the former Python to repeat a famous line or do something eminently ridiculous. Does this sort of thing happen to him a lot? And do the absurd ghosts of Monty Python and Fawlty Towers follow him wherever he goes?

"I don't really get tired of talking about *Monty Python and Fawlty Towers*, no," he says. "But you can get rather stuck in conversations when people start telling you what their favourite Python sketch is. And though you're genuinely pleased that they liked Python, you're not terribly interested in which individual sketch they preferred."

"Some people will say, 'Do your funny walk', and what they don't realise is that if you started trying to do it, it would actually be slightly embarrassing."

You tell him that next time he should do it, to teach people a lesson; perform his silly walk along the fluorescent boulevards of Montecasino, where he's performing his Joburg leg of *Alimony*. He laughs and says he doubts his hamstrings are up to it.

Cleese's fame has endured generations, and will continue to do so. This is a very rare thing. When you think of today's Lady Gagas and Russell Brands, you can't imagine anyone born today knowing who they are when they turn 30. But Cleese, John Cleese. You tell your friends and family that you interviewed him and

they're intrigued; you tell your sister who's in first year at varsity, who BBMs and Tweets and thinks Rihanna is rad, and she says: "Wow, John Cleese. How awesome!"

You remember a cold Saturday in August. You were maybe 11 at the time. Your father rented a video called *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. You sat on the carpet and he pressed play. Suddenly, there was a nude man behind a piano. There was the phrase "And now for something completely different"; there was a giant Siamese cat terrorising an English town and there were musical mice. You laughed. You thought it was marvellous. You got it. You had never seen anything like it before, but you got it. You thought maybe it was your English roots but as you got older and befriended true South Africans, you saw that they too knew who Cleese is, what Monty Python is, who Basil Fawlty is, and that, mostly, they find all of it highly amusing.

So, you ask Cleese — he tells you at the beginning of the interview that he's sitting on the couch with his feet up so you're imagining him like that now — about this monumental fame. What's it like? What's it not like?

"I think one of the good things about being famous is that you're very clear about what it brings and what it doesn't," he says. "Because in this insane — and I mean insane — celebrity culture we all live in, it's as though people think that an ordinary, good, happy life isn't enough. The effects that has on ordinary culture are absolutely tragic."

"Now, people don't want to become a banker or an accountant or a lawyer or an architect or a teacher. They just want to be famous. It doesn't matter if they achieve that by becoming the minister of defence or selling drugs. It's all about becoming famous, and that is an absolute collapse of society."

Cleese tells how people used to come up to him 30 years ago (30 years!) and ask if they



Five things you might not know about John Cleese:

- 1) His family surname was originally "Cheese". Fortunately, his father changed it in 1915 when he joined the army.
- 2) He was over six feet tall by the time he was 12.
- 3) He supported Barack Obama's campaign and offered to be his speech writer.
- 4) He was stranded in Oslo during the 2010 volcano eruption in Iceland and paid £3 300 for three taxi drivers (working in shifts) to drive him 1 500km to Brussels.
- 5) His voice can be downloaded for use with a TomTom GPS.

could have a picture of him. Now, he says, people ask if they can have a picture with him. He says this makes him feel awkward because posing in a photograph with someone implies some sort of relationship. He tells you he thinks it's "rather strange".

He adds — while noting that this is an "interesting bit of psychology" — that when most people meet him they're more often keen to tell him about themselves rather than ask him questions.

"I very seldom get people asking me 'Why did you do that?' or 'When you did that sketch...'. That kind of question is always interesting, but when they start talking about their son's schooling about 90 seconds after they've met you, you realise that what's going at a deeper level is their desire to be registered on your radar. It's as though the excitement is in them talking to me rather than listening to anything I might have to say."

But the good thing about fame is that it presents you at the half-open door of people you'd like to meet. Especially if you're funny.

"If you make people laugh," he says, "you often find that people want to meet you. There's

something about comedians in particular — they're held in affection. When somebody makes you laugh, you feel warmly towards them. So I've met a number of people that I would've otherwise had a lot of difficulty getting access to. Particularly as I've got older, because so many people used to watch Python when they were students, so they've got this long-term feeling of affection."

You think Yes, comedians, there is something about them, isn't there? So you ask one of history's most accomplished, most famous, why the exceptional of his cadre are so often depressed, suicidal alcoholics with tumultuous lives. You think of Tony Hancock, Lenny Bruce, John Belushi, Chris Farley.

"Creative people on the whole are creative because they have a kind of connection with their unconscious." And

now, you're gripping the phone hard, holding the recorder close to the receiver, hoping you collect all of this from a man who has been there, who is still there.

"The trouble is, you can have a bit too much connection with your unconscious. If you've got a lot of stuff breaking through that hinterland — the subconscious — it may be that you're having to handle feelings all the time that can be quite dark. If you're at the threshold — the subliminal — if your stuff is coming up the whole time and you don't know how to mediate it with the conscious, then it can become a bit overwhelming."

"But, also, one of the things about great artists is that they don't care about anything other than their work, so everything is secondary. So all the things we (he means 'normal people') work at, such as having a reasonably sensible life, a decent relationship with a woman and looking after our children properly, those become a bit subsidiary to people like Picasso and even to people like Bertrand Russell for that matter. They almost go too far in the other direction, they are too intellectual. And when you meet very intellectual people, they're generally not very emotionally balanced. They're brilliant but their judgment is poor."

Cleese pauses now. Silence permeates the distance between Joburg and England, some unseen, static void between the lines while he thinks about his next point. You wait.

"Here's the thing: If you want to be a great artist, you have almost by definition got to be obsessed. Because unless you're going to put your heart and soul into your art, you're never going to be top class."

You don't want to mention it, but immediately you think of Cleese and his three failed marriages and you wonder if he's talking about himself. He's 71 now. Been in the business forever. What does he feel when he looks in the mirror?

"I feel in my 50s," he says quickly, as if he's considered it before, or even considering it each morning. "I always felt a few years younger. After *Alimony* in four years, I'll be 75, which is not a bad age to look around and say 'What do I really want to do now?' Basically the world is dictating to me that I have to put money-earning on the front burner. A lot of the work I do now, I do primarily because it is

well-paid. There are a number of things that I would like to be doing which I cannot because they don't bring enough money."

One of those things is parapsychology, something you're interested in too. You talk about the experiments that show there's a common thread among all races, cultures and religions when it comes to accounts of near-death experiences. Cleese wants to know more about this. He wants to know who, what, God is.

"People talk about God without saying what they mean by it," he says. "I think that there is some supreme intelligence, but I think it's very paradoxical. There is much wrong with religion, but I'm inclined to think there's something in religion; it's just that the churches have, by and large, lost contact with it. However, what religion used to provide was a certain set of values, of which decency played a large part, some kind of honesty, and that seems to be fading away now."

And you agree with him. And you want to talk some more with him. Talk about the dark places comedy comes from, about fame and death and the afterlife. But your 40 minutes with John Cleese have vanished. Time is up. You say goodbye. And he wishes you luck.

● Cleese will be performing at the Cape Town International Convention Centre from on October 21 and 22, and at Montecasino's Teatro from October 25 to 29. Tickets available from Computicket.



A HISTORY OF HYSTERICS: Clockwise from top — John Cleese as the Guv with Troye Sivan in 'Spud'; lemur love with the cast from 1997's 'Fierce Creatures'; from left Michael Palin, Kevin Kline and Jamie Lee Curtis; and Cleese as Basil Fawlty in the BBC series 'Fawlty Towers' attempting to convince a patron at his eponymous establishment to order something other than the Waldorf Salad

“It's all about becoming famous... the effects are absolutely tragic”

JOHN CLEESE QUOTES:

- Comedy always works best when it is mean-spirited.
- He who laughs most, learns best.
- I find it rather easy to portray a businessman. Being bland, rather cruel and incompetent comes naturally to me.
- I used to desire many, many things, but now I have just one desire, and that's to get rid of all my other desires.
- If God did not intend for us to eat animals, then why did he make them out of meat?
- The English contribution to world cuisine — the chip.
- The trouble with the British is that they are not interested in ideas. If Jesus came back today and offered to speak for an hour on British television, they would say, "What! Another talking head?"
- I never watch the re-runs.
- Too many people confuse being serious with being solemn.