
John Neville (London, England, 2 May 1925) was a well-known stage actor in England who came to Canada in a musical version of Lolita in 1972. The play bombed, but he did well and had a succession of artistic director jobs, culminating with his directorship of the Stratford Festival from 1986 through 1989. He continues to act in classical and modern drama (e.g. Krapp’s Last Tape at the duMaurier World Stage Festival in April 2000 and later that summer in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night). He’ll appear next year as the British High Commissioner in a TV miniseries, “Trudeau.” He’s done a good deal of tv work, ranging from Romeo in a 1955 “Romeo and Juliet” to frequent appearances in the “X-Files.” He also appeared in Regeneration 1997, The Road to Wellville 1994, Billy Budd 1962 and a few dozen other films.

Eric Idle (29 March 1943, South Shields, Tyne and Wear, England), one of the original Pythons, has appeared in and wrote much of everything they did. Some of his films are South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut 1999, Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life 1997, Monty Python & the Quest for the Holy Grail 1996, Nuns on the Run 1990, The Secret Policeman’s Private Parts 1984, Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life 1983 (Fish #3/Singer/Mr. Moore/Mrs.Blackitt/Watson/Atkinson/Perkins/Victim #3/Front End/Mrs. Hendy/man in Pink/Noel Coward/Gaston/Angela), Life of Brian 1979 (Mr. Cheeky/Stan/Loretta/Harry the Haggler/Culprit Woman/Warriss/Youth/Jailer’s Assistant/Otto/Mr. Frisbee III), Monty Python and the Holy Grail 1975 (The Dead Collector/Mr Blint [A Village N’er-Do-Well Very Keen on Burning Witches]/Sir Robin/The Guard Who Doesn’t Hiccough but Tries to Get Things Straight/Concorde [Sir Launcelot’s Trusty Steed]/Roger the Shrubber [A Shrubber]/Brother Maynard). He composed several unforgettable songs, among them, “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life,” “Death,” and “One Foot in the Grave.”

Sarah Polley (8 January 1979, Toronto, Ontario) had a few small roles before her performance as Sally Salt in Munchausen. Since then, she’s appeared in 25 other theatrical and tv movies, among them No Such Thing (2001), The Law of Enclosures (2000), The Secret Heartbreaker (1997), and Exotica (1994).

Oliver Reed (Robert Oliver Reed, 13 February 1938, Wimbledon, London—2 May 1999, Valletta, Malta) died of a heart attack while filming his last movie, Gladiator 2000. He was like the little girl with the little curl: when good, he was very very good; when bad, he was horrid. He was in The Bruce 1996 (how could we not mention that one?), Castaway 1987, Fanny Hill 1983, The Big Sleep 1978, Tommy 1975, The Three Musketeers 1973, The Devils 1971, Women in Love 1969, Oliver! 1968, The Damned 1963, The Square Peg 1958 and nearly 100 other films.

AVATARS: This is at least the fifth film of the Munchausen saga: Georges Méliès, Les Adventures de Baron de Munchausen, France, 1911; Josef von Baky’s sinister and erotic version, funded by the Nazis, Münchhausen, Germany, 1943; Karel Zeman’s Baron Präsíl/The Original Fabulous Adventures of Baron Munchausen, Czechoslovakia, 1961, and a 1977 animated children’s film.

MUNCHAUSEN SYNDROM (from Merriam-Webster’s Medical Dictionary 1995): n.: a condition characterized by the feigning of the symptoms of a disease or injury in order to undergo diagnostic tests, hospitalization, or medical or surgical treatment.

FROM GILMANN ON GILMANN edited by JAN CHRISTIE, FABER & FABER, LONDON & NY, 1999

Snow White is the first movie I can remember and The Thief of Bagdad was the first film to give me nightmares. But I also remember having scarlet fever—one of the many fevers you could get in Minnesota—and at the time I was really hallucinated. I was in the bedroom, and I could hear my parents in the kitchen and the refrigerator was blowing up and killing them all. It’s remained with me, as if I’m still in that room. I still have certain dreams that cling, which I’d swear are real, because my senses and my whole body seem to have experienced them. That’s always been the problem, not knowing what’s real and what isn’t. I’ve got this sense memory of dreams I remember clearly, yet other things that really did happen I don’t remember at all, so which is more valid? I only know that one has formed me more than the other: that’s been basic from things that really did happen I don’t remember at all, so which is more valid? I

When I make a film, I lay things out but I don’t always show how they relate. I try to confuse the audience, like it’s a puzzle to be solved. I try to make the things that feel honest and real. Whole worlds existed in this little box, and you had to people them with faces, build the sets, do the lighting, everything. It certainly introduced me to much more than I was getting in Minne sota. There were two worlds: one was real, with trees, and plants and snakes, which I loved and walloped in; and the other was the exotic realm of The Shadow, The Fat Man, Let’s Pretend and Johnny Lujack, Catholic Quarterback from Notre Dame. The stories were always dark—somehow radio is good for shadows—and they tended to be urban.

You have to leave spaces for people’s imaginations to do the work. When I make a film, I lay things out but I don’t always show how they relate. I juxtapose things and the mind has to make the connections. It’s not that I want to confuse the audience, like it’s a puzzle to be solved. I try to make the audience work at it and do their bit, and if it succeeds then everyone comes out with their own film. I know the story I’m trying to tell, but the one they come away with may be a different one, which is fine and dandy because they’ve become a part of the film-making process.

From when I wasa little kid, I always drew cartoons. The first contest I won, when I was about ten, I won by cheating—and so my career began. We’d gone to the zoo and we were supposed to draw an animal that we’d remembered. I’d had some early drawings I did of domestic things, such as a Hoover, that became Martians. Instead of anthropomorphizing, I was alienizing them. The other very important element was that we were serious churchgoers and I read the Bible all the way through . . . twice. You can’t beat those stories for scale and drama and passion. , and I grew up with all of that.

Thanks to all the church stuff when I was a kid, and with my father a carpenter and my mother cleanly a virgin, I knew who j was, and my desire for martyrdom was considerable. A few years ago my wife Maggie said she’d never really thought about mortality, and I found myself saying that every single day since I was a kid I’ve thought about my own death. I always felt I was chosen and that I had something special—which is easy to translate into the wrong things if you’re not careful. That’s where humour has been my saving grace. When I look at other directors—all of whom are clearly mad and think they’re God—the question is: how to combat the feeling that you’re the Messiah with all the answers. I have a sense of what the truth of things was and I wanted to deal with the world outa bit and do good, and yet my sense of humour always undercuts these impulses. ‘I fight not for me but for the gift that I’ve got’—this idea comes from a religious background. Well, I’m not the Messiah, but I’ve got a lot of stuff here which has to be protected from all those other people who are trying to destroy it.

You were serious about becoming a missionary?

Yes. The Presbyterian Church, particularly in America, in very communal. I was head of the youth group in the local church, I would go to summer camps and my best friends were the minister’s sons. But, in the end, I couldn’t stand

the fact that nobody felt able to laugh at God. Hold on a minute, I said, what kind of God is this that can’t take my feeble jokes? It was the sanctimoniousness and, ultimately, the narrowmindedness of the people who were protecting this deity that I never thought needed any protection. Their God was a much smaller God than I was thinking of—less powerful—and he needed them to protect him. I just got fed up with it because I thought: this is getting dull now and there’s a whole world out there that’s off-limits. That was when I was about seventeen.

In the end, I decided that religion is about making people feel comfortable—providing explanations and giving answers—while magic is about accepting the mystery and living with question marks. Mystery intrigued me more than answers. The difference between Close Encounters of the Third Kind and 2001: A Space Odyssey is that the end of Kubrick’s film is a question, while the end of Close Encounters is an answer—and it’s a really silly answer—little kids in latex suits.

In general America tends to be afraid of nonsense. That’s what I liked about English comedies—they weren’t afraid to be nonsensical—but America’s always too busy being earnest, moulding itself, wanting everything to be educational.

I came from a world where Doris Day and Rock Hudson films used to drive me crazy, because everyone in them was so clean and well-scrubbed and shiny, with perfect white teeth and hair always in place. The world isn’t like that, yet it was depicted this way in the cinema and people seemed to believe it, which really bothered me. . . .

I think that was why I moved to New York, to get away from all the cleanliness and neatness, which felt artificial, and to live instead in squalor, which felt honest and real.

. . . I have to say that one bit of reading that is absolute bullshit is what Eisenstein wrote about his music scores-composition of picture goes left, right, rising, so the music’s got to rise in the same shape. Rubbish. For years I believed this because the guy was a genius; in fact, I think a lot of my life has been spent believing in geniuses and their godlike stature—especially their total control over what they do, their complete understanding of everything that they do. But I’ve never experienced that: it’s always been after the event.

Did I tell you about my one trip to Moscow, when we showed Brazil? I went to the Eisenstein Museum with David Robinson, and I was already working on Munchausen. Suddenly I saw a copy of Munchausen on the bookshelf, but when I reached up for it, I knocked a framed drawing on to the ground, which was a cartoon that Walt Disney had done for Eisenstein. My plan all along was to make Munchausen as a Disney cartoon, but in live action. Wasn’t that wonderful? I forgive Sergei all the bullshit. In fact, I’ve always loved his appearance, with that great beaming face and Eraserhead hair.

You were serious about becoming a missionary?

On [Munchausen] When the shooting finally did get underway, difficulties arose due to my Protestant method of film-making, as opposed to the local Catholic method. Peppino Rotunno wanted all information to go through him and he would then dispense it. By contrast, I’ve always worked in a completely open way where everybody has access to me. This became a real sticking point and I decided that if I had to be God, then I would be a Protestant God, where priests aren’t necessary because everyone can approach him directly. But Peppino was the Pope and took great offence at this non-hierarchical regime. He could be surprisingly petty about sharing information, not even telling the continuity girl the Pope and took great offence at this non-hierarchical regime. He could be surprisingly petty about sharing information, not even telling the continuity girl what they do, their complete understanding of everything that they do. But I’ve never experienced that: it’s always been after the event.

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that we’d never leave the ground, but they said, ‘Don’t worry, we’ve lightened the load.’ I looked out the window and saw those big hamper on the tarmac—they’re the costumes and we’ve left them behind to make room for all the Italians’ evening wear. ‘They’re coming on the next flight,’ I’m told but instead they end up in Barcelona, at the start of a customs strike, so they can’t be destroyed and tents blown over. But when we did the scene where Gustavus blows and we needed a hurricane, it was dead calm.

The original moon sequence was gigantic. It had 2,000 extras, with musical numbers, heads changing bodies, palaces; it was all there in the script, storyboarded. It was almost a film in its own right, about what happens during an eclipse of the moon, the time of forgetting: sins, indiscretions, betrayals are all wiped out. Sally’s terrified that they’ll stay there, get caught in an eclipse and the Baron will forget his mission.

When they said we couldn’t do the moon, my response was that if Munchausen can’t go to the moon, then there’s no point in continuing. Our first solution was to do it like a Python film. Munchausen arrives on the moon: he and Sally open up a door and step into my office at Cinecittà, where we’re all sitting around in street clothes reading the script and we blame the insurers before the two of them step out again and continue the film. We laughed about that for a couple of days, then we felt it would be cheating. Eventually, we came up with the idea of just two people on the moon and the mind-body Cartesian duality, which is actually much neater. I think that was another example of financial strictures forcing us to find a clever solution, because what we were planning before was really my bid to be Cecil B. DeMille.

All that’s left in the film of the original DeMille banquet set is a big semi-sphere red structure that you can see just the ribs of it was the framework for a huge inverted dome of St. Peter’s which was going to be a massive amphitheatre. Basically, we adapted what we already had. In the sequence when they arrive on the moon and the buildings are zipping around, these were literally the drawings of the buildings we were going to build full size. We mounted them on plywood and colored them with felt-tip markers. Dante added a few sequins on pins to give them some glitter, then we put them on tracks and pulled them back and forth fast on ropes—another interesting result of the cuts imposed on us. For me, it was a moment of being free of the responsibility of what we had set out to do; we could throw it all up in the air and see where it landed.

Robin Williams appears in the credits of Munchausen as ‘Ray D. Tutto’, the ‘king of everything’. Why is he not named?

When Robin agreed to do the film, his managers were very much against the idea, because they thought we were going to ‘pimp his arse’—in other words, sell the film on his back, even though he only appeared in a small part. So the deal was that he could do the film, but couldn’t be credited. The crazy thing is that, once the film came out, Robin was delighted with it and he got great reviews. You would have thought that at this point they would have allowed him to speak openly about it, but that didn’t happen. It’s ‘contractual’, as they say.

...at the eleventh hour, Vulcan was finally cast: we got Oliver Reed instead of Marlon Brando—who was really never going to do the film—and he proved to be brilliant. The second AD had worked with him on Castaway and assured us that he didn’t drink at all. Well, everybody lied on this film—Olly, of course, did drink, but he was wonderful and enjoyed working with John Neville—they both admired each other. As for Venus, this was only the second film that Uma Thurman had ever done. She was just seventeen and a half, and the day she was doing her nude scene, her mother was on the phone trying to persuade her to go back to high school to get a diploma. I said, ‘It’s too late, Uma, you’re a fallen woman, there’s no way back.’

How did you come to cast John Neville as the Baron? He’s not usually considered a film actor, much less a star, although he’s famous in theatre circles.

I was trying to find an actor whom people didn’t know too well. At one stage I went to see Peter O’Toole, who would have been perfect, but for a variety of reasons he didn’t want to do it. At another point, Fellini himself was suggested as Munchausen, because he’s one of the great liars and charmers. In fact, we had thought of John Neville earlier, but were told by his agent that he didn’t do films, since he ran the Stratford Ontario Shakespeare Festival. Then a make-up girl asked if we’d thought of him, and she said that she knew his daughter well. She called him and it turned out that he was a big Python fan; so we met and talked and he agreed to do it. The punishing thing for him was that this was the first film he’d done in years, and it turned out to be one of the worst films of all time in terms of its making. Having enjoyed the immediacy of the stage for so long, to be involved in a process where you sit around for hours, then get up and say two words and go back to sitting again, was really painful. I think at times he regretted having got involved. John had a terrible time with his false nose: he was in make-up for four hours every day and some days he wouldn’t even be used because the schedule was so screwed up. It was only after months that I discovered that the reason he was so grumpy wasn’t just the time spent in make-up or even the waiting; it was because his glasses wouldn’t sit on the false nose, so he couldn’t read. Fortunately, Thomas found him a pince-nez that did the trick. When it was all finished, I think he was pleased with the result, but the process was a nightmare.

Your original inspiration had been Doré’s illustrations, but what were the other visual and stylistic sources? After all, despite its Arabian Nights fantasy, this is also your only full-scale historical film to date.

Apart from Doré—who is frustrating, because you can’t recrimate him for real—the other big influence on Munchausen is baroque architecture and art. Once I got to Rome I realized I had chosen the right place: it is the baroque city and that’s what Munchausen is about. The Age of Reason had taken over and returned to classical forms, but before that came the baroque and Munchausen is very like that—famboyant and fabulously over the top. All over Rome you can see marble becoming flesh and flying in Bernini’s sculpture. So the king and queen of the moon are made out of stone, and yet they float. Those great volutes we used for the king’s bed were pure Baroque. And that’s why the theatre setting worked so well: it had all the extravagance, and yet here was a world that was trying to be precise and civilized—like Jackson’s office which is white, spare and very crisp. Of course, I was also cheating and using nineteenth century stuff, such as the morbid romantic image of death, who is feminine and embraceable. I was trapping the Age of Enlightenment between the baroque and the romantic. We were also looking at a lot of the pompiers artists, like Grégoire, and that’s where Doré comes in.

One of the great things about shooting in Rome was working with Roman craftsmen. There were three sculptors there who did various things, from the little boat to the great equestrian statue and the King of the Moon’s bed. That bed is extraordinary: you would never find anyone in England who could build something as complex as that. The Italians are all classically trained, so they’ve done their volutes and their equestrian statues. They were also prima donna; they all had to have their own studios and worked as if the others didn’t exist. The painters were also phenomenal. And Dante was a great politician, who could get more than anybody else out of Cinecittà—times I thought he was producing the film.

It must have been more difficult than on Brazil to reconcile cartoon stylization with all the craftsmanship and visual richness available at Cinecità.

I was trying to do a Disney cartoon in live action too. I mentioned that amazing coincidence of reaching for Munchausen in the Eisenstein Museum and knocking over the cartoon that Disney had done for him. The sequence inside the belly of the whale is my Pinocchio.

It was interesting working on the costumes with Gabriella, who is great and had worked with Visconti. I wanted to keep things slightly cartoony, so that the Baron’s in red, Berthold’s in yellow and so on—all very primary. But it was hard for her to deal with primaries; normally her colours are beautifully muted. It was interesting to force these styles together—my cartoony view and her sophisticated feel. It raises the film to a different visual level. Of course, the detail in Disney cartoons like Pinocchio is exquisite, which is what we were trying to achieve.

One of the things that intrigues me about Munchausen is the moment they come out of the whale’s mouth and end up on the beach. There’s an incredible feeling of
relief because we’ve been in an artificial environment—like the moon and the belly of the whale—for so long and suddenly it’s real sea, real sky and real sand. I remember the first time I saw it put together, the effect was really powerful: ‘Ah, we’re back in the real world.’ It wasn’t planned that way. Or maybe it was planned on a subconscious level. When I look at my films, I’m always surprised how well thought-out these things seem in retrospect. But other people are much better than me at putting into words what I’m doing instinctively.

That sounds like a good working definition of the auteurs theory—finding coherence after the event in things that are very much the product of intuitive decisions and chance events. Film directors surely know better than most how many elements in a film lie outside their control.

You start out thinking that you know what you’re doing. Then you get lost in the forest and come out the other end and look at the film, realizing that you somehow made it. But along the way there are many surprised, things you didn’t know you were going to do. I keep trying to demystify the whole auteurs approach to films, although I think I’m probably more of an auteur than most. I know that it’s the product of a lot of people who all contribute in different ways, yet, somehow, it ends up being something that can be best described as ‘a Gilliam film’. The best way I can explain it is that I’m the filter that lets certain ideas through and stops others. That’s my function; I have an idea of what the film’s supposed to be, but half the things that end up in the film I would never have thought of myself. However, many of the Italian crew just wanted a maestro who would say, ‘I want this or that; no, don’t come up with your own ideas... just give me that shade of green.’

Isn’t that specifically the Italian tradition of the maestro-director? Perhaps there are directors like that, but Dante told me how Fellini used to work: Dante would design the sets, Gabriella did the costumes, they would all work collaboratively. Then afterwards Fellini would draw cartoons based on what was done, and would take credit for visualizing the whole thing, thus maintaining the mystery of the maestro. I really want to break that down.

But doesn’t somebody have to have an overview of how it’s supposed to add up? You can’t expect each person working on a film to know their part of the whole.

The reality is that most directors don’t know either. The numbers of sets I’ve gone on to and talked to the crew who say they don’t know what the director wants. But they read the script and think it should be like this, so they do it and the director gets the credit for it. I remember Dante saying about one of his more recent projects, ‘I don’t know what he wants; I show him these things and I don’t get a yes or a no, so I just build.’ What I’ve discovered is that this is the norm. Directors or producers hire good people who do their stuff and, in a lot of cases, you could make a quite respectable film without a director. So what’s the difference? Certain directors do have vision, ideas of what they’re trying to achieve. These are the real directors as far as I’m concerned—and some get called auteurs but they’re definitely in a minority.

In the end, I felt totally betrayed when Columbia released only 117 prints in America; an art film will often have 400 prints. They opened in fifty-two cinemas, where it played to the best business and reviews they’d had since The Last Emperor; but they didn’t want to go with it. They were trying to balance the books to get Sony to buy the studio, and they discovered if they spent no money on either marketing or production, they might just succeed. Other films suffered too but we were the most obvious casualty. There was even a publicist on our side who was banned from the marketing meetings. So I got on to Larry Estes at RCA-Columbia video, who had paid $7 million for the video rights, and asked him to find out what was going on, since it would affect his investment if it didn’t do well in the cinema. He said he’d never seen anything like it; everyone was busy justifying what they were doing and using exit polls to prove it could only work in major cities.

Interestingly, in the places where they went out and sold it seriously—especially France and Spain—it opened number one and stayed there for a couple of weeks. But distributors always get caught up with previous things you’ve done; because of Brazil, they thought this was a sophisticated adult film. I convinced the French distributor that it was a family movie. Why not put on matinees? They did, and they were a huge success. In England, it just died. There had been all this press coverage about it going out of control, a big disaster—everything was about ‘big’—and then you notice there are no ads, so something is clearly wrong and nobody bothers to go. Columbia had this idea that, if it worked in Germany, it would give them some sort of sense how it would do in the United States. So that’s where it first came out, and the Germans hated it. I suppose it’s as if a German or a Russian came and did Tom Sawyer; it would seem presumptuous. The reaction I got in German press conferences was a fear of the extravagance of Munchausen. The last time anyone was that outrageous, with that many lies and dreams and big plans, was Hitler; you could see the Germans backing away, not wanting to admit that a lie could be more powerful than the truth—plus, of course, their outrage at me for taking one of their classic films and remaking it in my own image. The only place we got good reviews in Germany was in Munich.

The nice thing about Munchausen now is that it has its own life. I’m always running into people who say it’s the best of my films, or that it’s their favourite film, or that their kids watch it all the time—and I just say I’m glad they like it. Actually it’s great to have made a lost classic, like Korda’s I, Claudius or The Magnificent Ambersons—one of the greatest films ever made, that nobody will ever see. And, if they do catch a glimpse, they’ll discover the shadow of what it might have been: the great ‘if only’. It’s important to make at least one of those in your career.

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Our next film is TUESDAY, JANUARY 22: MERVYN LEROY, LITTLE CAESAR (1930)

What do you get when you blend the American Dream with two social disasters (Prohibition and the Great Depression) and three wonders of modern technology (fast cars, the Tommy gun, and sync sound for motion pictures)? Rico Bandello, the protagonist of Mervyn LeRoy’s pre-Code Little Caesar, the first great gangster film. Edward G. Robinson delivers a star-making performance as the deadly, blustery doomed gangster (a fictionalized blend of Chicago’s Al Capone and Brooklyn’s Buggsy Goldstein) and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., is terrific as his buddy with the dancing feet. Tim Dirks wrote: “One of the most well-known and best of the early classical gangster films...often called the godfather of the modern crime film. ...It is generally considered the first great crime film. It is a taut and vivid film that set the genre’s standards and launched the entire popular film genre.” Confidential sources inform us that Little Caesar is one of Tony Soprano’s three favorite films. One makes him think; one makes him cry; this one makes him think, smile and cry. How can you miss it? Selected for the National Film Registry.

The MAFAC Sunday Classics

Every Sunday at 3:00 p.m., the Market Arcade presents a different great film in its Sunday Classics series, curated by M. Faust, who usually introduces the films. Next Sunday, December 9, it’s Sergio Leone’s The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966), with a score you can whistle by Ennio Morricone and maximum cool by Clint Eastwood, who was turned into an international superstar by this film and its two low-budget spaghetti predecessors, A Fistful of Dollars and For a Few Dollars More. The other treats Faust has scheduled for your Sunday afternoons are: December 16 McCabe and Mrs. Miller, Robert Altman, ’71; December 23 Manhattan, Woody Allen, ’79; January 30 The Graduate, Mike Nichols, ’67. For descriptions of each film visit http://www.sundayclassics.com.