



## Chapman, Graham (1941-1989)

by Linda Rapp

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Comic actor and writer Graham Chapman, a member of Britain's madcap Monty Python troupe, was in the vanguard of actors to come out publicly as gay.

Chapman's first entrance was dramatic: an air raid was in progress when he was born on January 8, 1941 in Leicester, England.

Because his father served in the police force, the family moved quite often as he was posted to a succession of different towns. Chapman's favorite place growing up was Melton Mowbray, a town in Leicestershire famous for its pork pies, where he participated actively in the school theater program.

After graduation from Melton Mowbray Grammar School, Chapman entered Emmanuel College, Cambridge in 1959, following his older brother into the study of medicine.

In his second year at Cambridge, Chapman auditioned successfully for the prestigious Footlights acting troupe, as did first-year student John Cleese, with whom he soon began writing sketches. Eric Idle joined the group the following year.

After graduating from Cambridge in 1962 Chapman pursued his medical studies at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, a teaching institution in London. Later that year the annual Footlights show, originally called *A Clump of Plinths* but subsequently retitled *Cambridge Circus*, came to play in London's West End. When a cast member dropped out, Chapman replaced him, and he began juggling his medical training and his acting.

The well-received show was slated for a tour in New Zealand. Chapman decided to interrupt his medical course and sign on after he had occasion, as secretary of the students' union, to lunch with Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, who told him that New Zealand was "a beautiful place" and "you must go."

After the tour Chapman resumed his medical studies and eventually qualified as a physician, but he also began performing in cabaret shows and writing sketches and dialogue for a number of television programs, including for Footlights alumnus David Frost's satirical *The Frost Report*. Other writers for the Frost show included Michael Palin, Terry Jones, and Eric Idle. Soon, together with John Cleese and Terry Gilliam, they formed the troupe that launched *Monty Python's Flying Circus* on the BBC.

The show first appeared in England in October 1969 and continued in first-runs until 1974. A few years after its British debut the program aired on American PBS stations. It quickly became a favorite, especially among college-age viewers. The zany sketches featured both amusing and irreverent--and often ludicrous--dialogue and broad physical humor. The actors appeared in a variety of costumes, frequently in drag.

Some of the Python skits, especially those written by Chapman, were gay or gay-inflected in theme. Perhaps the most famous of these is "The Mouse Problem," a sketch involving men who dress in mouse

costumes and secretly engage in cheese-tasting parties. The skit is in effect a parable about the secretive lives led by British homosexuals in the years after decriminalization of homosexuality, but before social acceptance was widespread.

Some of the sketches that Chapman wrote with John Cleese, such as "The Ministry of Silly Walks" and "Dead Parrot," are now considered classics of British comedy.

Although his comic imagination was in many ways the most surreal and subversive of the Pythons, Chapman often played figures of authority and the "straight man" in situations that sometimes revealed the looniness that could lurk behind a buttoned-down upper-class British exterior.

The Python troupe wrote and appeared together in several films, beginning with Ian McNaughton's *And Now for Something Completely Different* (1971), the title of which is a catch-phrase from the television show. The movie, which was comprised of remade sketches from the series, did not do well in the United States, where the Pythons were as yet unknown.

Their second feature, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (directed by Jones and Gilliam, 1975), received a more enthusiastic reaction from their growing number of American fans. Chapman's portrayal of King Arthur in the medieval spoof garnered him enthusiastic notice.

He played the title role in the third Python movie, *Life of Brian* (directed by Jones, 1979). The film drew criticism from some conservative groups who viewed it as sacrilegious, but audiences were appreciative. Indeed, the publicity generated by the fulminations of religious groups against the film is probably what made it so successful at the box office, despite its being banned in many jurisdictions. Many consider Chapman's turn as Brian of Nazareth, a man mistaken for the Messiah, as his finest work.

Chapman also appeared in the final Python film, Jones's *The Meaning of Life* (1983).

In addition to their collaborative work the Pythons undertook independent projects. Chapman's included co-writing and starring in the pirate spoof *Yellowbeard* (directed by Mel Damski, 1983), which was not a commercial success.

He continued writing scripts. Among these were some that he co-authored in 1988 with his lover David Sherlock for a comedy/fantasy television series entitled *Jake's Journey*, loosely based on Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, in which Chapman would have starred. The project was never realized.

In 1980 Chapman published a memoir, *A Liar's Autobiography, Volume VI*, which mixes truth and fiction. Along with fantasy passages are serious discussions of his medical studies, his involvement with Monty Python, his battles with alcohol, and his homosexuality.

Chapman, who was 25 before he realized that he was homosexual, was among the first British entertainers to come out as openly gay, which he did in 1969, soon before the launching of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. His openness provoked some hostility from television viewers and critics.

Chapman met his life partner, Sherlock, in 1966 in Ibiza, where the latter was hoping to rekindle a "holiday romance" from the previous year. That plan fizzled, but he and Chapman fell in love and remained together for the next twenty-four years.

Chapman became, in his own words, "an early campaigner for gay liberation." In 1972, he co-founded the publication *Gay News*, to which he lent his financial support. The inaugural issues of *Gay News*, England's first national gay liberation newspaper, featured an interview with Chapman and Sherlock.

In the early 1970s Chapman and Sherlock adopted John Tomiczek, a teenage runaway from a large family. Tomiczek, who recognized Chapman from his television acting work, approached him; and Chapman, recognizing that the youth was running a fever, provided for his medical treatment and returned him to his home in Liverpool.

When Tomiczek ran away again, his father eventually surrendered custody of him, and he joined Chapman and Sherlock's household. The couple agreed to adopt him on condition that he finish school. Tomiczek, who died of a heart attack in 1992, eventually became Chapman's manager.

Chapman faced medical challenges of his own. He suffered from alcoholism for several years, but gave up drinking during the filming of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, when he realized that the situation had gotten out of hand. In 1977 he entered a hospital to undergo a recovery process and thereafter completely abstained from alcohol.

Chapman was unable to overcome cancer, however. Diagnosed with a malignant tumor on his tonsil in November 1988, he underwent an operation, but the disease had spread to other parts of his body, including his spine. Despite further surgery and radiation therapy, he died on October 4, 1989. Sherlock was at his bedside at the end, and the couple's last words to each other were affirmations of their love.

Chapman's death came the day before the twentieth anniversary of the first broadcast of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Only a month earlier he had been able to take a limited part in the troupe's special anniversary program, *Parrot Sketch Not Included*, which aired later that year.

Susan Schindehette has called Chapman "the most doggedly different member of his era's most unpredictable comedy troupe." A BBC biographical sketch describes him as "the only genuine anarchist within Python, and the most subversive element in a group of subversive elements," adding that "it was his unique outlook on life that coloured some of Python's most surreal, most bizarre and, most importantly, funniest moments."

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## **About the Author**

**Linda Rapp** teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of [www.glbtq.com](http://www.glbtq.com).