

JONES, TERENCE GRAHAM PARRY (TERRY) (1942 - 2020), actor, director, writer and popular historian

Name: Terence Graham Parry Jones
Date of birth: 1942
Date of death: 2020
Spouse: Alison Jones (née Telfer)
Spouse: Anna Jones (née Söderström)
Child: Sally Louise Parry Jones
Child: William George Parry Jones
Child: Siri Jones
Parent: Alick George Parry-Jones
Parent: Dilys Louisa Parry-Jones (née Newnes)
Gender: Male
Occupation: actor, director, writer and popular historian
Area of activity: Performing Arts; Literature and Writing; History and Culture

Terry Jones was born on 1 February 1942 in Colwyn Bay, Denbighshire, the second son of Alick George Parry-Jones, a bank clerk, and his wife Dilys Louisa (née Newnes). He first met his father on the platform of Colwyn Bay railway station when he returned from India after serving with the RAF during World War Two. When Terry was four, the family moved to Surrey where he attended primary school in Esher and the Royal Grammar School in Guildford before going on to read English at St Edmund Hall, Oxford,, though, as he put it, he 'strayed into history', the subject in which he graduated. During his time at Oxford he met Michael Palin with whom he performed comedy in *The Oxford Revue*.

Graduating in 1964, Jones and Palin joined a team of writers and performers on *Twice a Fortnight*, a BBC sketch show that aired for 10 weeks at the end of 1967. He also wrote for *The Frost Report*, the series that first saw the future Pythons working together, and in the ITV sketch show, *Do Not Adjust Your Set*. He and Palin went on to write *The Complete and Utter History of Britain*, which aired on the London region of ITV in 1969. But Jones grew frustrated with the way the show was put together and decided he wanted to take charge of his own projects. 'It got me really convinced that you have to control everything,' he said later. 'You not only act in the things, you've got to actually start directing the things as well.'

He had the opportunity when the BBC TV show *Monty Python's Flying Circus* launched four series of 45 episodes in October 1969, and spawned three spin-off films. He wrote and acted a range of much-loved characters including Cardinal Biggles of the Spanish Inquisition and Mr Creosote as well as his screeching portrayals of women becoming audience favourites. It was a theme he returned to in the films, with roles as Brian's mother in *Life Of Brian* and a rampantly fertile working class northern mother in *The Meaning Of Life*.

Terry Jones was the driving force behind abandoning punch lines at the end of sketches in favour of absurdist continuity, such as when Graham Chapman would appear as an army colonel and declare the sketch over because it was 'too silly', or an armoured knight would wander on and hit someone over the head with a rubber chicken. Jones also appeared naked, apart from a collar and tie, playing an organ as a form of punctuation between sketches. Such inventiveness took a lot of pressure off the writers who no longer had to dream up a killer line to round off a sketch. Jones's talents as a writer and actor then extended into directing *The Holy Grail* with his fellow Python Terry Gilliam before taking sole directorial charge of *Life of Brian* in 1979 and *The Meaning of Life* in 1983. Fellow Python John Cleese said: 'Of his many achievements, for me the greatest gift he gave us all was his direction of *Life of Brian*. Perfection.' Terry Gilliam described Jones as a 'brilliant, constantly questioning, iconoclastic, righteously argumentative and angry but outrageously funny and generous and kind human being'.

Post-Python, Jones's TV comedy writing continued with *Ripping Yarns*, with Michael Palin. Never afraid to challenge orthodox views, in 1987 he directed the film *Personal Services*, loosely based on the real-life story of Cynthia Payne, who achieved notoriety after being charged with running a brothel in suburban London. As he diversified into writing historical books, notably *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (1980), he debunked the notion that medieval knights were paragons of Christian virtue.

In his later years, his children's books and television presenting took precedence. Jones established himself as a popular children's author with *The Saga of Erik the Viking*, which won the Children's Book Award in 1984. He continued directing, notably *The Wind In The Willows* in 1996 which he adapted and in which he also played the part of Mr Toad, winning top

prize at the Chicago International Children's Film Festival. He wrote and presented *Crusades*, a four-part documentary series that ran on BBC TV in 1995, featuring scenes of Jones dressing in period costume to illustrate some of the events he was describing.

Despite his parents moving to Surrey when he was four years old, Jones always had his heart in Wales. 'I bitterly didn't want to leave and hated being transported to the London suburbs,' he recalled. 'I regretted that and was always saying 'I'm Welsh'. I couldn't bear it and for the longest time I wanted Wales back,' and again later, 'I still feel very Welsh and feel it's where I should be really.'

In 2009, Jones took part in the BBC Wales programme *Coming Home* about his Welsh family history, tracing his family back on his father's side to 1760, with ancestors working in lead mines and his great-grandmother a servant for the Mostyn family and his great-grandfather a Methodist minister. In later life, Jones took a keen interest in the fortunes of his home town's Victorian theatre, becoming its patron and officially re-opened Theatr Colwyn in 2011 after a £738,000 refurbishment. 'Theatr Colwyn means a lot to me,' he said, 'because my grandfather [William Newnes] conducted the orchestra for the Colwyn Bay Operatic Society there and my mother and uncle both trod the boards on that very stage. This is a beautiful theatre, the oldest working cinema in the UK - it's an important thing to have in a community like this, you need a centre, a place for people to go.'

Jones's work was not always appreciated in every part of Wales. Monty Python's *Life Of Brian* was banned in some towns over claims it was blasphemous. One such town was Aberystwyth, where Jones and Palin attended a special 30th anniversary charity screening of the film in 2009, when the town's mayor was Sue Jones-Davies, who played Brian's girlfriend. There was no such problem with his 1981 children's book *Fairy Tales*, which was adapted for the stage as *Silly Kings* by National Theatre Wales in 2013.

In October 2016, Jones received a standing ovation at the BAFTA Cymru Awards when he was given a Lifetime Achievement award for his outstanding contribution to television and film. Supported by his friend and Monty Python co-star Michael Palin this acclaim was a final public farewell for Terry Jones. Palin said Jones was 'very Welsh in his attitudes, his passion, his energy and inventiveness'.

Jones married Alison Telfer in 1970 and they had two children, Sally in 1974 and Bill in 1976. In 2009, Jones left Telfer for Anna Söderström whom Jones met at a book signing event in 2005 when she was a 23-year-old Oxford student; their daughter Siri was born in 2009 and after they had been in a relationship for five years they married in 2012.

In 2015, Jones was diagnosed with primary progressive aphasia, a form of frontotemporal dementia that impairs the ability to speak and communicate. He had first given cause for concern during the Monty Python reunion show *Monty Python Live (Mostly)* in July 2014 because of difficulties learning his lines. He became a campaigner for awareness of, and fundraiser for research into dementia and donated his brain for dementia research. By April 2017, he had lost the ability to say more than a few words of agreement. He died from his dementia on 21 January 2020 at his home in Highgate. His family and close friends remembered him with a humanist funeral ceremony.

Jones was asked in a 2011 interview how, out of all his various achievements, he would best like to be remembered. 'Maybe a description of me as a writer of children's books or some of my academic stuff,' he replied.

Author

Peter Gaskell

Sources

BBC Wales News: [Monty Python's Terry Jones and his Welsh roots](#)

BBC News Entertainment & Arts: [Terry Jones: Monty Python stars pay tribute to comedy great](#)

BBC News Entertainment & Arts: [Monty Python's Terry Jones: Master of the absurd](#)

BBC Wales arts: [Terry Jones](#)

Further reading

Cardinal Fang's Python Site: [Terry Jones](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Terry Jones](#)

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