



Eric Idle: busy attending to legacy of fellow Python Terry Jones.

In Idle moments, look on the bright side

Nick Miller

Always look on the bright side of death, Eric Idle once sang.

But the loss of Terry Jones, the second member of the Monty Python comedy group to cease to be, is still a bit raw.

"It was a terrible shock, you know," Idle says, at the other end of a phone call to LA.

Jones' passing in January came after a slow departure due to dementia, in contrast to the sudden 1989 loss of the first Python Graham Chapman, who died aged 48 to an aggressive cancer.

But still, in the end, it hit hard. "He was an extraordinarily talented fellow and a lovely man,"

Idle says. "And the thing about Terry Jones is he directed two of the top 10 comedy movies ever made. That's quite an extraordinary achievement."

Idle did not attend Jones' private funeral in North London in early February, though his name was on a floral tribute from the four remaining Pythons.

But he is currently elbow-deep in Jones' legacy, crafting and recrafting a new work based on the *Holy Grail*, the Pythons' first narrative film, which Jones co-directed with Terry Gilliam and which was steeped in Jones' extensive expertise in medieval literature.

In 2005 Idle adapted the *Grail*

into an award-winning Broadway musical, *Spamalot*, with the blessing (though not the input) of the other Pythons.

"This year, he says, he's going to make the musical back into a movie – again, not involving the original troupe."

"The movie business, they go on holiday till the end of the Academy Awards and then suddenly they all make their decisions. We have everything ready... with such a Python fan base you think 'why are you even hesitating?' I think we'll do it this year."

Spamalot dredged *Grail* and added smatterings of other Python highlights. Idle credits director Mike Nichols (*The Graduate*) for

finding the "heart" in the play.

"Nichols is such a great tutor of writers," Idle says. "He said 'there has got to be a truth in this'." So King Arthur gets the girl, and Lancelot comes out as gay, and underneath the silliness there is a moral about morality itself.

"It opened on Broadway during the Bush wars," says Idle. "And it has all sorts of anti-authoritarian questioning of the king. And we have one of those here now, so that's quite interesting."

One of the oldest jokes, he says, is that the emperor has no clothes. The Pythons were always questioning authority: the dead weight of the war generations, the stiff manners of early television.

"Well we have the emperor and he has no clothes. And no wig."

Idle writes every day, he says, up at 5.30am and to his desk, maintaining the discipline used to hone sketches to comedy perfection.

He's writing a book, and a stage show he hopes to tour to Australia at the end of the year.

"If I get a good joke I don't hesitate to use it."

And in the meantime, he's licensed *Spamalot* to an Australian group who are putting it on in Melbourne in May.

"They look like they're up for it," he says.

Spamalot is at the Playhouse at Arts Centre Melbourne April 29 to May 9.

Bees' skills add up to hard-wired maths

Liam Mannix

Adrian Dyer's bees are smart. Really smart. His team built them a tiny bee school and they proved excellent students.

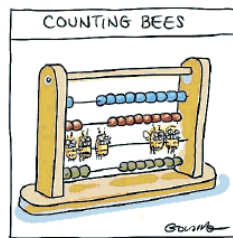
They understand numbers. They can add them or subtract them. They understand the concept of zero – an idea that escaped the Romans. All this with a brain the size of a pin.

"No one had thought it could be possible that a brain of less than a million neurons could do this," said Dr Dyer, an associate professor at RMIT in Melbourne.

Fifteen years ago, scientists believed maths was the preserve of humans – something that made us special. Thanks to scientists like Dr Dyer, we have learned that is entirely wrong. Many animals and insects can do maths. Often, they are really good at it.

"In the last year, we have had all these discoveries," said Dr Dyer. "It is changing the way people think brains understand numbers."

Female túngara frogs, for



example, can count the number of calls a male makes – and will mate with the one who can make the most.

Orb-weaving spiders know how many insects they have trapped in their web, and don't like it when scientists take one away. Some fish have shown extremely good head-count ability – maybe better than ours – letting them always pick the bigger shoal to join.

Young chimpanzees are even faster. Flash numbers on a screen for half of the blink of an eye, and the chimp will be able to put them in order. Humans cannot do that.



Scarlett Howard and Adrian Dyer and their bee student. Photo: Jason South

But Dr Dyer is interested in bees. Why? Because if a creature with a brain the size of a pin can do maths, that suggests it is a very important ability indeed.

The "bee school" built by Dr Scarlett Howard, Dr Dyer's PhD student, is a Y-shaped maze.

At the entrance, the bees see a number of shapes on a sign. If the sign is blue, they must use subtraction to get through the maze. If the sign is yellow, they must use addition.

Signs inside the maze give them a correct answer, which leads to a

sweet drink, and a wrong answer, which leads to a bitter drink.

At the start, the bees got it wrong as often as they got it right. But after 100 tries, they picked the right answer more than 80 per cent of the time. They were learning.

"The way you ask an animal a question is not the same way you ask a human a question," said Dr Howard. "If you ask it in the way they cannot understand, you assume they cannot do it."

Humans evolutionarily diverged from bees 600 million years ago. Yet both can do maths. That

suggests maths evolved long before humans appeared. We're the beneficiary of that – maths is now hard-wired into our brains.

That would explain studies that show babies can instinctively pick the larger pile of objects, long before they are taught maths.

"That's innate. We are predisposed to have that skill," said Dr Megan Spencer-Smith, a brain development researcher at Monash University. The math skills we learn build on this hard-wired skill.

Dr Dyer and Dr Howard learned something else from their bee school. Some bees learned the maze quickly. Others took more time. But eventually, they all got there.

"That suggests it's not necessarily such a smart thing to assume that all humans should learn maths at the same rate," said Dr Dyer.

"Sometimes we tend to categorise people as good or bad at maths. What the bees show is maybe everyone has the potential to be good at maths: you just have to give them sufficient time to learn."