bored, middle-aged man stares vacantly at his television, as a little sun on the end of a stick extends from the screen and pokes him on the nose. His eyes go blank and he melts into his chair, as his bodily essence pours out the cuffs of his pants and streams into a grating on the floor, dripping into a sculpture mold that, one by one, churns out millions of identical families — naked but for their socks, glasses, and Mickey Mouse ears — who populate the world with mindless compliance. Director Terry Gilliam’s animated intro sequence to Monty Python’s *The Meaning of Life* represents all that he lives to joyously dismantle. Institutionalized conformity is the enemy and whimsical thought is his weapon. As a college student he twisted the school’s literary magazine into biting satire, as the lone American member of Monty Python he helped topple British society’s deference to authority, and as a filmmaker he proved that imagination can trump corporation. And whether it’s intruding executives, limited financing, or the laws of physics, Gilliam is in his element when he’s up against a foe. But braving the thick of acrimony and obstruction wasn’t always his chosen lot, as Gilliam’s formative years seemed bathed in good fortune. His college magazine work led him smoothly into a creative position alongside one of his heroes, and in the course of his publishing duties he struck up a friendship with a young comic named John Cleese, who with a young comic named John Cleese, who

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**TERRY GILLIAM**

**The Road to Parnassus**

**BY ANDREW FISH PHOTOGRAPHY CRAIG CAMERON OLSEN**

A flawed breakthrough of *Brazil* is bona fide legend, and *Munchausen’s* enchanting visuals were nominated for four Academy Awards. Even *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, which, through a harrowing series of events, collapsed on the sixth day of production, yielded the lauded documentary of the experience, *Lost in La Mancha*. Though the Minneapolis-born director is a thorn in the side of many who feel he could alleviate a lot of his grief through reasonable compromise, Gilliam is heralded by collaborators for his uncommon flexibility in the face of changing circumstances and new ideas. And though eschewed by many professionals who fear the inevitable mire, many more are aching to work with him. Jeff Bridges and Robin Williams both changed perceptions of their abilities in the beautifully, painfully heartfelt modern-day fairytale, *The Fisher King* (1991) — which also allowed Mercedes Ruehl to earn her Best Supporting Actress Oscar. Brad Pitt went uncharacteristically frenetic as Jeffrey Goines, the insane son of a powerful scientist and virus expert in 12 *Monkeys*. Johnny Depp sunk deeply into the staccato, drug-addled genius of Hunter S. Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998), and 10-year-old Jodelle Ferland took on a multi-character role with a range most actors never achieve in the lambasted, ignored, and sadly misinterpreted *Tidelands* (2005). “To me, it was a Rorschach test for people, and the way they perceive the world,” Gilliam says of his role of a suddenly orphaned girl and her vivid inner world. “It’s a really sad film, but to me it’s all a very optimistic and hopeful thing! It’s the resilience of children. We don’t want to believe our children are strong. We want them to be victims.”

Heath Ledger embraced the idea of a fantastical romp with the visionary director when he signed on to *The Brothers Grimm* (2005), in which he and Matt Damon played a pair of 19th-century con artists thrown into a genuinely supernatural crisis. Thrilled with Ledger’s performance, and as a friend and mentor, Gilliam invited the gifted rising star to join in his next dreamy outing, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*. And it was during the filming of this epic exploration into the choice between light and dark that Ledger passed away. Yet the love that Ledger had engendered among his peers inspired a remarkable spirit of cooperation that allowed his performance to reach the screen. Against all prediction, in pure Gilliam form, production resumed within weeks of Ledger’s passing, with Depp, Jude Law, and Colin Farrell paying homage to their friend and carrying his final piece to completion. “It was amazing how many people wanted to help, and there were people I didn’t even call who offered their services,” recalls Gilliam at a recent press conference. “It was great because these guys — not just the three actors — but everybody on this film, loved Heath so much that they were determined to somehow get through it. Other actors had stop dates, crews had other projects, and they all said, ‘No, we’re going to finish this thing for Heath.’ And that is a very rare experience.”

*Imaginarium* is the story of an immortal wizard (Christopher Plummer is Doctor Parnassus), whose passion for nurturing humanity’s imagination is ever sabotaged by his addiction to gambling with the Devil (the irrepressible Tom Waits). Amid their snarling antagonism and dueling surreal imagery, Ledger shows up as the wild card, whose allegiance is up to debate. The mysterious, charming rogue steals the heart of Parnassus’ daughter, Valentina (actor/supermodel Lily Cole), stirs up contempt in the magician’s longtime assistant, Anton (a stellar Andrew Garfield), and serves as yet another annoyance to Parnassus’ oldest friend, Percy (Verne Troyer in his first major dramatic role).

Devoted to scaling the heights and depths of magical realism, Gilliam shows no sign of letting up. Once more against the windmills, *Don Quixote* is back in pre-production. “It’s on a track,” he laughs with reporters. “One of the tracks is built. The horse has three legs, so it’s moving forward. I have a Don Quixote; that’s the first thing.” Our talk with the mischievous, eternally childlike auteur is rife with his infectious giggling at the wonderment of it all. After months of press, though, the weary director’s interest in discussing *Parnassus* is nearing its end when we meet with him poolside in Beverly Hills. With this in mind, we harbor a notion that we can touch briefly on his magazine illustration period and his animation with Monty Python, before covering the major points of his film career. But as it is with a man who works tirelessly to show the world what a stream of consciousness looks like, we find ourselves engrossed in the tale of Gilliam’s early years.

**Venice: Could we start off with a little about your history?**

**Terry Gilliam:** If I can remember it. It’s so funny now, because I’ve done so many interviews about these things over the years, I’m beginning to believe that the interviews might not actually be the true history — just what was convenient to talk about. [laughs]
You were going to be a missionary, is that right?
Yes, at one point. I went to Occidental Col-
lege on a Presbyterian scholarship. I was a
reasonably zealous youth. I think it was prob-
ably because I wanted to go out and travel the
world — and also, I guess, it’s what you do
with films. You’ve got ideas, and you’re trying
to transmit them to a lot of people That’s what
missionaries do. I just got bored, or irritated,
with the closed-mindedness of those in the
Church. Every time I made jokes about God,
they took umbrage. What kind of God do you
believe in that can’t take a joke?

How were you two communicating?
Just letters! Remember we used to do that?
[laughs] I would send a letter off, and, amaz-
ingly, a month or two later, a letter comes
back! [gasps] It’s from Harvey — wow!

And he told you not to come out?
Yeah, but of course you don’t listen! [laughs]
And I went there, and he agreed, okay, he
would say hello because I was there. He was
working in the Algonquin Hotel, and to me the
Algonquin was this romantic place, where
Dorothy Parker and the whole Algonquin
Round Table met [from 1919 through 1929]. All
that’s where I met John Cleese. I got him to
be in one. We were writing the fumettis, I was
designing, everything — it was great! When you’re working
on something with such a small staff, you
have to do everything. I was the delivery boy,
I was the guy on the phone, saying, “Mr.
Gilliam will be sending a package over very
shortly.” And then Mr. Gilliam, me, would turn
up as the delivery boy. “Hi!” [laughs]

John Cleese was touring with a show in
the States when you met him, right?
He was touring with Cambridge Footlights

Come on, learn to think about things. Don’t accept the
reality that’s beaten down on you every day.

How did you make the move from Min-
nesota to Occidental?
We moved out to Panorama City when I
was about 11 or 12. I went to school at Birm-
ingham High School, and then went to Occi-
dental College. And then off to New York with
Help! Magazine and Harvey Kurtzman.

You were the editor of a magazine at
Occidental College that you revamped.
It was actually the literary magazine, and I
turned it into the humor magazine, called Fang. And at the time, Harvey Kurtzman was
God to most of us young satirists and car-
tonists, and he was doing Help! Magazine in
New York, and I kept sending him copies of
Fang. We were doing things like Help! We were
working with these “fumetti,” these photo sto-
ries. Fumetti means “puffs of smoke,” because whenever somebody talks, you see
puffs of smoke. All these Italian romance
magazines did fumetti all the time, and Harvey
took the form and turned it into satirical photo
stories. I was doing the same thing. They were
like movies without movement.

You did some of your own photography
and used stock photos as well?
We wouldn’t use stock photos. We’d tell a
story with stills. It’s just like doing a story-
board, basically, [with wide shots] and close-
ups. Just static, and they talk with balloons.
So I was doing them in college, and Harvey
wrote a nice note back, saying, “Well done.
Good work!” And I graduate with nowhere
to go, and I wrote him a letter, saying, “I’m
coming to New York!” And he said, “Don’t
bother! There’s no work here, kid!” [laughs]
I was sitting that summer reading Moss Hart. 
George Kaufman and Moss Hart became
this great theatrical duo, writing just incred-
able, wonderfully funny, satirical theater. A
huge success. And I was reading his autobi-
ography, called Act One. When he was a kid,
his hero is George Kaufman. He comes to
New York and ends up working with his hero
— and that’s exactly what happened to me
with Harvey.

the great satirists in New York: [Robert]
Benchley, [George] Kaufman... So I turn up at
the Algonquin Hotel, and knock on the door,
and open it, and Harvey’s not there — but all
the famous cartoonists from Mad Magazine
were working in this room. It was like
opening the door to Olympus. Chuck
Alverson, who was the assistant editor at the
time, was quitting, and they were looking
for somebody, and I just walked into the job. If I
had come a couple days later, somebody
else would have had that job.

So you did get to meet with Harvey.
Yeah. He just said, “I’m looking for some-
boby,” And I was being all bright and bouncy.
He said, “We’ve got no money.” They were
paying two dollars less a week than you
would get on the dole. There’s a job! [laughs]
So how many people are going to jump into that one?

Mad Magazine and Help! were associ-
ated?
Harvey had left Mad, and did a couple of
other magazines, one called Humbug, one
called Trump, and then Help! And the first
assistant editor on Help! was Gloria Steinem.
So Gloria was the first, Chuck Alverson — who
ultimately co-wrote Jabberwocky with me —
was number two, and I was number three.
Then that was it! [laughs]

How long were you there?
I was there for about three years, until the
magazine failed. It was slowly on the decline,
and finally it failed. And I took what little money
I had and went off to Europe, hitchhiking
around for six months.

What kind of work did you do at the
magazine?
Everything. That was the thing: Harvey
and I were the editorial and art staff. [laughs]
There was Jim Warren, the publisher, and
there was Harry Chester, who did the actual
paste-up work; that was it! We were doing
the fumettis, I would be going out and finding
actors who would work for $15 a day — and
Revue. They were really on the coattails of
[British comedy stage revue] Beyond the
Fringe, who had been very successful, but
[Footlights wasn’t]; they ended up in the Vil-
lage at some small theater. Graham
Chapman was in it, Bill Oddie from [British
comedy trio] The Goodies was in the group.
John, of course, stood out, and I got him to
be in this fumetti story about a man who
falls in love with his daughter’s Barbie doll,
and consummates the relationship with her.
He made $15 for his day’s work! [laughs]

Was it a fun day working with him?
Yeah, it was great! And we sort of
became friends. Then I went off to Europe,
and I think he went off to work for
Newsweek. Then we didn’t see each other
until years later, when I finally came, in
1967, to England. When I’d hitchhiked
around Europe, it was the end of ‘64 and
the beginning of ‘65, and then I came back and
I actually lived in Harvey’s attic for several
months. I didn’t have a place to stay, so I
was in the attic near the air conditioning.

Harvey was one of your heroes when
you were younger, and then you ended
up not only working with him every day,
but living in his attic. What was that like?
[laughs] Harvey was great! He was a great
mentor. I learned so much with him. With
Mad comics, he really created satire, and
pastiche, and parody, all of that, on a comic
level, far greater than anyone else ever had.
And it was a meticulous kind of work. It was
all in the detail. It was detail, it was rich.
His comics were made like a movie! He would
use tracking shots, and zooming in. Nobody
was doing anything like that! So, he was,
for my generation, a hero. With Help! Maga-
zeine, we were a magnet for all the guys who
eventually became the underground comic
artists. Bob Crumb would come to New
York, Gilbert Shelton, Jay Lynch. These
were all the guys that were around Help;
they were all my buddies. We were all just
romping around New York.
It sounds like that's how you cut your teeth for the work you ended up doing with Monty Python.

Everything I learned there was applicable to Python. The difference was that I started doing animation. I used to draw on film that we would peel out of the dustbin of production companies. They would throw the film out, and there would be lots of clear film, so you would just draw on it, and make little animated films that way.

Who were you doing this for at that point? I was doing it in New York. Because the magazine came out once every two months, there was a lot of time in between. I was working in a studio that did stop-motion animation — dancing cigarette packs, and things like that. I got a job there, working for nothing. I just wanted to be near the gear, and find out what the stuff was. I managed to save enough money to buy my first 16-millimeter Bolex camera. My roommates and I, on the weekend, we had one roll of film, three minutes. Depending what the weather was, we'd write a little movie and go out and shoot it. We were just playing, practicing.

How did you first get involved with television? That was by the time I had gotten to England. By then, I had come back to America and worked in advertising out here in L.A., for Carson Roberts, the company that gave us the phrase, “Have a happy day,” and the smiley face. It all came from Carson Roberts, and I was working there. I was an art director and copywriter, and I was working with Joel Siegel. Remember Joel Siegel on ABC’s “Good Morning America”? He and I were great friends — and we met, actually, on Help! Magazine. Once again, Help! Magazine; Harry Shearer, too. This was before National Lampoon came out, and Help! was the one national comic satire magazine. So that’s how that all came about. Advertising for 11 months was enough, so I got out of it.

You've said that you were being treated badly at that period in the U.S., because of how you looked.

Yeah, I had long hair, and suddenly I realized what it’s like being a black or Mexican kid. Driving around in an English car with the top down, and the cops would stop me every night. And me, I just can’t keep my mouth shut, so the cops have got me up against the wall, and they’re giving me this monologue about my being some kind of druggie, out-of-work musician, living off some rich man’s daughter. I said, “No, no, no. I work in advertising, I make a lot more money than you guys do.” That’s really how to [conduct] yourself with a cop! But my attitude was, “Fuck you! Just fuck you. What the fuck is this? Because my hair is long.” I got really angry with America, and I realized that if I’m that angry, can you imagine what the black kids are like, and what the Mexican kids are like? They’re getting this nightly as well — without a nice job like I had.

So you moved to the U.K.

Yes, I was living with an English girl, who was a reporter for the Evening Standard in London. She wanted to go back, and I said, “I’m out of here. Let’s go.” I was very crazed about the war going on, the Vietnam War. I thought, “This is ridiculous. It’s a stupid war.” So I went to England.

When did you get involved with Monty Python?

In England, I was just doing illustrations. Magazine work, I could always do. And my girlfriend at the time became the editor of this magazine called The Londoner, the weekly news magazine, and I became the art director on the thing. Again, the two of us would basically do it with a couple of other people. We were churning out a news magazine, weekly, which is good exercise! [laughs] We scooped everybody, all the big magazines — and we had the first color photograph of the riots in Washington, D.C. We were out there before anybody else. I used to take all the artwork by train up to the North of England, where we printed, and then the next morning come down with magazines, which we would then run around, putting on the desks of all the major newspapers and magazines. [laughs]

This sounds a lot like our work at Venice! Yeah, I know! I know exactly this world. [laughs] So I did that for quite a while — and John [Cleese], by then, was very well known on television because of “The Frost Report,” so that's when I said, “John, come on, introduce me to somebody in television. I want to get out of magazines!” And that was it.

And he introduced you to Humphrey Barclay.

Humphrey, interestingly enough, was an amateur cartoonist. And I came in with my portfolio, and he loved my cartoons, and I think out of sympathy, he bought a couple of my written sketches. He forced them on Mike Palin, Terry Jones, and Eric Idle on their [children's comedy] show, “Do Not Adjust Your Set.” [laughs]

I've heard the story about how you walked into the room in your Afghan coat, and Eric Idle fell in love with it.

Yes, it was the coat that started a relationship. He loved this Afghan coat. It was one I’d bought in Turkey; it was a big sheepskin coat right down to the floor, and I had been painting it. So it was a beautiful coat. Me with my long hair — I was quite glamorous then. [laughs]

You waltzed in and the future Pythons took you in.

Well, there was actually one step more, because they used those sketches — and they didn’t do them very well, I thought. [laughs]
And then Humphrey started another series called “We Have Ways of Making You Laugh,” and had gotten me on it. Eric was on it, and several other people — and I used to do caricatures of the guests. That’s when I did my first animation, because they had material that they didn’t know how to present, and I said, “Let me animate it.” And I had, I think, two weeks and 400 pounds, and the only way I could do it was with cutouts. I started cutting things out and moving them around, and nobody had ever seen that. And overnight, I was an animator!

**Were you using sketches you had drawn?**

Would they base some of the endings and beginnings of the sketches on your animations?

No, I’d worked out those transitions. Like my dancing Venus: I had it fall into the water, because I knew we could then start the sketch with it. I cut out with Venus floating down a fish tank, which would take us into the pet shop. So I would do those kinds of transitions.

That led into the parrot sketch.

Yeah. [laughs] So all of that stuff was worked out in advance, but I was always amazed that my stuff worked so smoothly with what they were doing. We all just seemed to be on the same wavelength — approaching it from different ways, but that same wavelength was going right through it.

And you gave them the ability to work on the meat of the comedy without having to be concerned about punch lines.

That was a decision we came up with very early on — that the punch lines were killing normal sketches at that time. So, get rid of punch lines! And that’s why my function was to, before the punch line, get in there and take over and move on! [laughs]

So you were allowing them to ... ... not embarrass themselves.

It wouldn’t have worked without the mortar you provided.

There was this animation I had called “Beware of Elephants,” which was totally stream of consciousness. One thing flowed into the next, and Terry Jones argued very strongly that the show should be like that. More stream of consciousness; everything flows. It wasn’t stop-start-stop-start. You’ve just got to smooth the transitions, so nobody realizes they’re transitions.

Who did all the grumbling and strange voices in your animations?

That was me. I would sit there and do all the sound effects and most of the voices in the cartoons. I’d be recording it at home under a blanket with kitchen utensils and all sorts of things. [laughs]

I’d always wondered who did that. [classic Python animation grumbling] “Oh, hello there, umm grrhm mmmrmm.” [laughs]

Once the show was finished, did you have any idea that Python was going to move into film?

Actually, we had done the first three seasons, but we hadn’t done the last season when we did Holy Grail. Terry and I had been chafing at the bit for quite a while, wanting to do it better than it was done on television. We had done the first film, which was And Now for Something Completely Different, which was just a collection of sketches. And Ian MacNaughton, who was directing the show, directed it. So Terry and I were grumbling, “Let’s do it better!” So we had our chance in Holy Grail. That was the leap.

And then there was Life of Brian... ...and Meaning of Life, yeah.

I don’t know why I’m in the minority, but *The Meaning of Life* is one of my all-time favorite movies.

I just got bored, or irritated, with the closed-mindedness of those in the Church. Every time I made jokes about God, they took umbrage. What kind of God do you believe in that can’t take a joke?

No, at that point I was basically cutting out things. I was cutting out the heads and the hands, but then the bodies would be things I had drawn on these characters. That was the first thing, and then I did another one, and another. Then they did “Do Not Adjust Your Set,” and I did animation on there — so by then, there were four of us that were a team: Mike, Terry, and Eric were doing the writing, and I was doing what I did. We all just got on very well. And John and Graham... John had been offered a television series at the BBC, if he wanted to take the slot. He was keen to have ideas that I had written down, and then suddenly there are six people — and there’s Monty Python.

Were you involved in the writing of the sketches?

No, not really. Mostly, I was just doing my animation sequences. When we had the joint meetings, when we were all together... Basically, Mike and Terry wrote together, Eric wrote alone, then John and Graham — so they’d come in with all their stuff. I would also have ideas that I had written down, and then we’d have these joint sessions, where everybody is throwing in, and tearing everything apart, and ideas are coming up. So that was a total, communal thing. Then it would end up with my taking over at a certain point from what they were doing, and taking it to the next point. In a sense, I had the most freedom of anybody.

Did you look at the final footage before you did the animation?

[laughs] Oh, no. The script was written, but they hadn’t started rehearsing it. Sometimes there would be film sections that I could then work from, but it wasn’t until we did the show. I would come in with my animation film cans on the day of the show! I would be there, put it in, they would do the sketches, and then it would all be edited together.

You know Henry Jaglom? He thinks it’s a masterpiece.

But for some reason, it’s so poo-pooed.

Well, we poo-pooed it, and everybody followed us! Because nobody’s thinking for themselves! [laughs] The great elements are as good as anything we’ve ever done — some better. But as a whole is what we were really talking about. Brian holds together; it’s like a movie. *Meaning of Life* is a series of sketches again, and some of them are good, and some of them are less good. But some of those sketches! I mean, I love that whole business with “Every Sperm Is Sacred.” The Catholic family, then the Protestant couple — wonderful stuff. And Mr. Creosote’s extraordinary. Some of the best stuff we’ve done is there; it’s just the totality that none of us were very pleased with.

The songs that Eric Idle did...

“The Galaxy Song” is wonderful. It’s a beautiful song. “The Galaxy Song” is better than “Always Look on the Bright Side [of Life].” It’s a really smart song. When I look at it now, I think what we were all really feeling is that we had somehow reverted back to the show, and the format of the show. We had all been wanting to make real movies. [laughs]

But the great songs, great animation, mostly great sketches, and then at the end with “Flying Circus” playing on the TV that’s floating off into space — that is Monty Python.

That’s what Henry said at Cannes. We actually won the Jury Prize at Cannes; it’s the one time we did win a prize. I said, “There’s some shit [in there],” and he said, “No, that’s what makes it so great! The variations, the highs and lows, is what makes it rich!”

I thought it encapsulated what “Flying Circus” was all about.
I think you’re right on that one, yeah. But Terry and I, we were just so desperate to be “proper filmmakers.” [laughs]

Well, then you got your chance to do that. What was the first film after Python that you directed?

First was Jabberwocky with Michael Palin, which is a kind of semi-escape from Python. The worst thing that happened with Jabberwocky is that it got sold as a Python film. And it’s not a Python film. Just because I’m involved, Mike’s involved, and Terry Jones is involved in the beginning — it’s not a Python film. And it was being judged on the standards of Python, which was not my intention.

How did you find the transition from Python to directing films on your own? [At this point we’re told we have one minute left.]

Oh, my God! Enough of that, get to the point!

So you made this movie recently called The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus. Can you just tell me some things about it?

All the websites have all the information. What do you want to know? What’s a good thing I can talk about?

And that was one of the funniest things; I wrote a note to the New York critics to that effect, and they just ripped me apart for daring to suggest to them how to approach the movie. The reviews were about me. Not about the film. “How dare he!” And I was saying, “It’s more of an homage to [Renaissance painters] Breugel and Bosch.” “How dare he compare himself to great artists like that?” Oh, shut the fuck up. I mean, look at Breugel and Bosch: We’re talking about people shitting, and doing wonderful, awful things, and that’s what I’m talking about. I’m not talking about their painterly technique, you asshole! [laughs] No, they hated any suggestion that maybe they needed some guidance.

And Time Bandits was after that.

And that was the big one. It’s the most financially successful film in the U.S. for me, when you actually do the numbers. It was huge. And it was a film that nobody wanted. The studios all passed on it in script form, and they passed on it as a finished film. We finally got it out because we went for the small company, Avco Embassy, and George Harrison and Denis, our manager, guaranteed five million for prints and ads. We went out and it was number one for I don’t know how many weeks. It was just big. That’s why I question the wisdom of the studios daily. [laughs]

That was your intro to the shape of things to come. Was it a lot of fun making that film?

It was great, a joy to make! Again, low budget, work hard and fast — we were lucky to get people like Sean Connery, which, I think, was obviously an important thing.

The stilt! Is that an image you’d had for a long time, of a ladder cracking down the middle and turning to stilts? No. I don’t know why that came to me. It started with, you know, “Reach for the clouds!” And so I thought, “Well, how do you reach for the clouds? Everybody uses phrases like that.” So, ladders! He’s climbing these ladders, and once I go from somebody climbing a ladder, and then some Russians are chasing him, and well, how do you stop it? So, nothing better than just [snapsnapsnap], and down it goes. This knock-on effect, the action always intrigued me. The thing goes down, and then maybe it goes right through the earth, around, up to the stars, back to the top, and down! That’s the way I imagine it. So it’s coming down at him — and then you have stilts! I’ve always loved “seven-league boots” in fairytales, so this is as good as you can get with giant steps, and off he goes. Those things — I don’t know why — they seem to come very easily to me. I just let my mind float, and the next thing happens. One thing is a knock-on effect to the next thing, which does that, and that. And they’re all pretty logical, as far as I’m concerned, so they don’t seem like great imaginative leaps. It’s just the logical progression of something. [laughs]

That’s what Parnassus is trying to teach people to do — to use their imagination. Your goals are similar.

Oh, totally. That’s exactly what it is. That’s me preaching to the crowd out there. “Come on, learn to think about things. Don’t accept the reality that’s beaten down on you every day.” We’re inundated with what reality is, around in their lives — and I say fuck that! Let’s go! And that’s what Parnassus is basically saying. [laughs]

And fuck that! Why is that reality? Learn to look at things. Find your own. Otherwise, you end up being, as Hunter Thompson predicted, a nation of panicky sheep — and that’s what America’s become now. People are afraid to think for themselves. They all want to be P.C.: “Don’t say those words, because they might cause offence.” Causing offence is the worst thing you can do to people? No! Actually, it might make them think! Everybody’s so thin-skinned now. My whole approach to life has been, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” And yet a lot of people are afraid to say things. They’re so timid, they’re tip-toeing...

Causing offence is the worst thing you can do to people? No! Actually, it might make them think! Everybody’s so thin-skinned now. My whole approach to life has been, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me."

And yet a lot of people are afraid to say things.

My last question is something I’ve been wondering about for years. Had you always thought, when you went to Grand Central Station, “Boy, this would make a great ballroom?”

No. There was a scene that was going to take place in there, and it was basically Jeff [Bridges] having a [revelatory] moment, because there was a lady singing. That’s all it was. I was watching the rush hour there with some of the crew, and I kept saying, “Wouldn’t it be great if…”? If all these people rushing to their trains, suddenly glanced over their shoulder and fell in love, and started dancing. And everybody said, “Wow, what a great idea!” I said, “Not gonna do that. That’s a Gilliam film, and we’re trying to do a Richard LaGravenese script!” And they kept beating me up, until, “Okay, I’ll do it.” [laughs] It’s that thing about being open to what’s happening in front of you, being aware of it, and being able to imagine that happening. For me, it’s a really easy thing to do. It depends on your state of mind. I’ve got a romantic mind up there. So how do you counter this mindless rushing? Well — love, maybe. And dancing! You know, they now dance every New Years Eve. An orchestra plays in Grand Central Station, and people Waltz. It came true — since Fisher King! [laughs]

That makes me feel so good inside. We can have an effect, occasionally. ▼