Python’s Life of Brian is scathing satire


Three wise men enter a humble stable and are greeted by a snagle-toothed wench named Mandy. When she finds out that the Magi want to worship her son Brian she tries to kick them out — until she finds out that they bear gifts; she becomes the model hostess. She willingly tries to kick them out — until she visits the wrong manger; so Brian is constantly pursued by the Romans, the Judean People’s Front, and an ever increasing number of people who believe that he is the Messiah. He is confronted twice by his followers, who demand a teaching; the first time he tells them “Fuck off,” but his ecstatic disciples ask “How shall we fuck off, O Lord?” The second time he delivers a real message: “You are all individuals, you don’t need a Messiah. You just have to work it out for yourselves.” Ah, yes, the message.

Brian is eventually captured and crucified, his final confrontations with his brother and his disciples are the funniest (and most irrelevant) moments of the movie. Everything finally ends with a production number, “The Bright Side of Life,” delivered by one of those awful people who only grow more cheerful as the situation becomes grimmer.

The six members of Monty Python really shine as actors in this movie; each member has at least five parts, and two (Eric Idle and Michael Palin) portray twelve different characters. They all manage to add a different element to each of the characters, sometimes so convincingly that you don’t notice the overlap. John Cleese stands out as the best actor of the troupe, playing diametrically opposite roles: he is the chief Roman centurion, and also Reg, the leader of the People’s Front, a leftist organization devoted to the destruction of the entire Roman Empire. His first mark in the revolution is painting an anti-Roman slogan on the walls of Herod’s palace. Brian’s back rums sour as he is discovered by Roman guards, reprimanded for his misuse of Latin grammar and force to rewrite the slogan one hundred times.

From this point on Brian is constantly pursued by the Romans, the Judean People’s Front, and an ever increasing number of people who believe that he is the Messiah. He is confronted twice by his followers, who demand a teaching; the first time he tells them “Fuck off,” but his ecstatic disciples ask “How shall we fuck off, O Lord?” The second time he delivers a real message: “You are all individuals, you don’t need a Messiah. You just have to work it out for yourselves.” Ah, yes, the message.

Brian (Graham Chapman) makes a two point landing on the head of a “very boring prophet” (Michael Palin), of the revolutionaries. Once again Python proves that you can play a cast of thousands with only six people.

The movie as a whole is more cohesive that Monty Python and the Holy Grail, but not as innovative. The time period used in Brian imposes certain limitations on the plot, a historical accuracy that must be observed, and at times this accuracy weakens the humor or makes it predictable. However, good laughs are more abundant and the pace never drags, thanks to Python director Terry Jones. Life of Brian is social satire at its best and should not be missed — after all, when was the last time you had your sensibilities ruffled?

— David Shaw

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