

# The ODD Couple: *TERRY* and JEREMY talk shop

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Director Terry Gilliam and producer Jeremy Thomas on going 12 rounds with the Weinsteins, riding with Don Quixote again and just what the hell *Auto Da Fe* actually means...

Terry Gilliam is an eternal optimist. By rights he shouldn't be. The ex-*Python*-turned-fabulist filmmaker has withstood a barrage of celluloid misfortune, the like of which would've sent those with a less robust constitution into jibbering retirement. The mastermind behind *Brazil*, *Time Bandits* and *Twelve Monkeys* has spent his entire career being plagued by money men who accuse him of losing control of his pop-surrealist visions and engage him in ugly power struggles that frequently play out in the public arena. From *The Adventures Of Baron Munchausen* in the 80s to *The Brothers Grimm* and *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote*, it has been far from an easy ride.

In the case of *Don Quixote*, its shoot was aborted entirely following logistical lunacy, apocalyptic rainstorms and the double-herniated disc suffered by its septuagenarian star Jean Rochefort – all chronicled in the 2003 documentary *Lost In La Mancha*. Bad karma also threatened to derail Gilliam's latest film, *The Imaginarium Of Dr. Parnassus*, following star Heath Ledger's death by accidental overdose, before Colin Farrell, Johnny Depp and Jude Law all stepped in to replace him in scenes set behind a magic mirror. A bittersweet conclusion, for sure, but at least Gilliam's blushes were spared a second time. If his eclectic films don't always live up to the fevered imagination that fuels them, Gilliam is still a rare individual voice shouting to be heard above a din of blockbuster homogeneity. And for that alone, he's a national treasure – he may be Minnesota-born but he's lived in the UK since the 60s.

By contrast, the tumult that hovers around producer Jeremy Thomas is of the vicarious variety. Unanimously lauded in the film industry, and with a Best Picture Oscar for *The Last Emperor* parked on his mantelpiece, Thomas has made a career of tying his horse to iconoclastic auteurs with an affinity for daring, contentious or just plain peculiar material. No wonder his list of credits reads like a roll call of arthouse favourites: *Bad Timing*, *Eureka* and *Insignificance* for Nicolas Roeg; *Naked Lunch* and *Crash* for David Cronenberg; all of Bertolucci's films bar one since *The Last Emperor* (including 2003's *The Dreamers*); not to mention *Merry Christmas*, *Mr. Lawrence*, *Young Adam*, *Sexy Beast* and many more.

Gilliam's crazed, impulsive mind allied with Thomas's ability to turn ideas into money for the most bizarre projects... It's a wonder the two men, who've known each other for thirty years, only came together professionally in 2005, when the gravel-voiced producer achieved lift-off for *Tideland*, the most macabre young-girl's coming-of-age story you're ever likely to see. An oddity even on Gilliam's gloriously deranged CV, *Tideland* bombed with both critics and audiences, but you have to admire Thomas' dogged perseverance, raising cash for a film in which the only name star, Jeff Bridges, sits dead and stuffed in an armchair for almost the entire running time.

And now Thomas, who Joel Coen once called the "patron saint of lost causes", has achieved an even more impressive feat: he's prised the rights to *The Man Who Killed Don Quixote* from the clutches of French lawyers, and given Gilliam a second shot at his dream project. Thomas wasn't involved in the first attempt – "Wisely," hoots Gilliam – but insists that its tainted history won't be a barrier. "Obviously I think it will be done easily otherwise I wouldn't have put the time into the whole situation," he says gruffly. "I don't want to waste time *ever*."

Watching the duo bustle around the Hanway Street headquarters of Thomas' Recorded Picture Company, it's hard to believe Gilliam is the elder by almost a decade – he'll be 69 in November to Thomas's sixty. The perpetually boyish director trails his no-nonsense producer around the offices like an eager puppy, chattering to him about an unnamed "asshole" actor, a mutual colleague who dresses in drag every Christmas Day and a one-word sticking point in the revised *Don Quixote* script. Thomas listens obligingly. You couldn't get a more glaring example of why one has carved his niche as a fiercely loyal midwife to talent while the other remains one of the most thrilling but confounding idea-smiths of his time...

*Do you remember how you met?*

JEREMY THOMAS: We knew each other for a long time through Soho, walking around the streets of the film industry, but I suppose *Jabberwocky* was the first time I got to know you and James Acheson.

TERRY GILLIAM: James Acheson, who did the costumes for *The Last Emperor*, had been working with me. But once he'd moved on to Jeremy that was the last I saw of him. *{Giggles}*

*How well did you know each other then?*

JT: Not really at all. Just passing in corridors. I was a junior producer starting my journey back then, and the two producers of *Jabberwocky* were friends of mine.

*But your paths crossed over the years?*

TG: There was a weird time when we were making *Time Bandits* and we had to go to a place called Ait-Ben-Haddou in Morocco, where Nic Roeg had been shooting – or in this instance *hadn't!* *{Laughs}*

JT: *{Shaking his head}* ...*Bad Timing*.

TG: *Bad Timing*, that's right. Apparently all the locals had brought their wares into this big village market for the shoot. And they were never shot.

JT: And the caliph chased us across the Atlas Mountains to get paid for those market stalls that never got shot!

TG: So we had to come in there and try to regain their trust. It was really quite funny. It can be a very piratical business, filmmaking: raping and pillaging the locals like locusts sweeping across the landscape... I also remember going out in 1987 to Beijing when you were doing *The Last Emperor* because I was chasing Peter O'Toole as a possible Baron Munchausen. That was the most extraordinary couple of days. You walked into the Forbidden City, which really was a closed place up until that point, and this incredible world had been created. Thousands of extras, all wearing these stunning costumes, and there's Jeremy and Bernardo up in the Emperor's Throne Room. Bernardo was an utter gent – 'Ah, Terry, seet in my chair!' – because he was sitting on the throne at that point. He'd moved up from a director's chair. I remember the most wonderful image was at the end of the day when it got dark and all these people were still in period costumes and they were brewing up little bowls of rice with these modern lights around them. It was absolutely stunning.

JT: It was a very magical moment. And then we went back to Cinecitta where you recommenced *Baron Munchausen* while we were editing *The Last Emperor*.

TG: Didn't you actually shoot a couple of scenes there?

JT: We did. We weren't allowed to shoot any intimate scenes in the People's Republic so the scenes of the Emperor and Empress on their wedding night we had to shoot at Cinecitta.

TG: They were probably both the most expensive films we'd ever done. These two monuments... clashing!

JT: We even saw Fellini walking around. It was quite a thing, Cinecitta at that time, seeing all these master filmmakers in the canteen every day.

*Before Tideland, had you discussed doing other projects together at any time over the years?*

JT: Yes, we talked about a number of projects because I liked Terry's films – they always stimulated me. I was continually pestering him.

TG: I suspected that Jeremy would like *Tideland*. It was dangerous and Jeremy does have a fondness for dangerous films.

*You squeezed Tideland in between two legs of The Brothers Grimm shoot...*

TG: No, *Brothers Grimm* was trying to squeeze it, squeeze it, because once I got to the point on *Brothers Grimm* of realising that the best thing to do was just walk away and let the Weinsteins play and then come back and talk about it, Jeremy had managed to get *Tideland* together. The Weinsteins said, 'Okay, go and do it' and then immediately grabbed us by the contractual balls and tried to stop the film, just because they could. I won't go into the details of just how many pounds of flesh they were after. But we got around it and we made *Tideland*, which was a joy. And in the end, they couldn't get anybody to take over *Brothers Grimm* so it came back to me. It's all about patience.

*Is it any more challenging as a producer trying to raise money for a Terry Gilliam film in spite of – or perhaps because of – his reputation?*

JT: Every film is tricky to raise money for. Every film has got special needs, so to speak. You have to understand the film and how you're going to make it, and then finding the money is commonsense with a little bit of alchemy.

TG: It was a great relief after the massive production of *Brothers Grimm* to go back and do something small. It was effectively three characters and Jeff Bridges sitting dead in a chair. *{Cackling}* Everything fell into place, except for the grass. Our biggest disaster was the grass. We had an agronomist come in, we needed an expert on grasses because the grass was supposed to be about waist high...

JT: Do you remember those great big water tanks we had to bring in?



TG: *{Wincing}* Oh, it was horrible! And then we got out there and the grass was a complete disaster. The guy was an idiot. We ended up having to paint the grass because it was just lying there.  
JT: It didn't look so bad in the film.

TG: It looked fine on screen in the end. But the film was kind of blessed. We finished all the exterior work in this valley and had a big party that night, went to bed, woke up in the morning, and there was two feet of snow. That was it – summer's over.

*You've said that Tideland gave you your confidence back as a director...*

TG: Confidence as a director is about trusting your own instincts and when you work with people that undermine that, after a while you're not sure what your instincts are and whether you should be trusting them. And if I don't trust them, I don't know how to work. I've got to believe what I'm doing is right. After *Brothers Grimm* I was pretty browbeaten to the point that I didn't know what I was thinking...

JT: Twelve rounds, that's what you were thinking.

TG: *{Laughs}* There are certain people who have nothing better to do than just batter away.

JT: There are all different kinds of producers. I try to align myself with the creativity of the film. And then be some sort of soft go-between between the reality of what the film is and the fantasy of what the filmmaker's trying to do. Often there's a war on a film between the financing side and what's actually happening out on the battlefield; they're making the film by remote but we're in the trenches. I like to be close to that action.

*You've aligned yourself with some brilliant filmmakers: Terry, Roeg, Cronenberg, Bertolucci...*

TG: All trouble! *{Laughs}*

JT: I've had a good record and I've had big business from them. And now I'm going back for more, because your relationship gets better with somebody over the years, unless you fall out with them! It's a richer relationship because half of it's not spoken any more – only the essential things are talked about and then without curtains, without a veil.

TG: Burka-less filmmaking... Ultimately, it's about trust. Always the thing is, with the actors too, 'Are we making the same film?' Personally I can get really paranoid about it. It's an irrational thing so when I work with somebody I know and trust I calm down. I've always said, 'If I'm really fucking up, you'd better just fire me.' Because I just assume I'm going to make huge mistakes along the way, so it's nice to have people that will say, 'Hold on, what are you doing here?' And if I can't argue my way out of it, then we're not on good ground.

*Terry, you're used to getting inane and/or insane comments from producers and executives...*

JT: He's still dealing with insane comments I'm sure. Even today.

TG: *{Laughing}* The good thing is it's got down to nitpicking on such a minute scale with *Don Quixote* that I said to Jeremy, 'Why are we even talking about this?' He's picking on little things, like a word that I think is an interesting one – *Auto Da Fe*. Do people know what it means? He's arguing that people don't and I should add a bit in the script just to make sure they understand what's being talked about. I'm assuming that most people are intelligent, although Jeremy is a more practical person when it comes to intelligence. Or lack of.

*What's bringing you back to Don Quixote? Why resuscitate a project that ended in such disaster?*

TG: Once you leap into the mud pit with Quixote, you've got to *stay* somehow. It's the very nature of the beast – it's about doing the impossible, doing mad things. After it collapsed the first time, everybody said, 'Just move on. Well, no, I can't. And now Jeremy has dredged it out of a pit of French lawyers.

JT: We've managed to unravel it so that it can be done again.

TG: The irony is that there may be a better film at the end of all this. Having not read it for those intervening years, knowing that it was a perfect script, I only read it again when Jeremy finally got it back, and I said, 'Whoops! Let's go to work.' Even though two-thirds of it is still from the original script, it now has a whole different angle and I think it's much better than what we were about to make. So I've been saved again. I'm lucky, you see.

*What changes have you made?*

TG: It's about the main character, whether you have a modern advertising man ending up in the 17th Century or whether you have a filmmaker who made a film about Don Quixote once in a little Spanish village and affected

all the people's lives in that village to the point that one of them actually believes he is Don Quixote. We never go into the 17th century, we stay in the modern world, and yet we enter Quixote's world – the world starts changing because of him being in it, this mad, false Quixote. It's changed everything and it's made the characters much more touching, pathetic even. Also, now that I'm older and worn out, we've chopped a lot out because certain people said it was much too complicated *{Nods in Jeremy's direction and starts cackling}*. We won't name names.

JT: The screenplay's completed and we are now finding how much the film is going to cost by being accurate about how we're going to make the film, which means re-budgeting without reference to the last film. And then we're going to cast the film like we're starting afresh.

TG: The one thing I can say is that none of those scenes that you saw in *Lost In La Mancha* are in this version, which is good because people will just have to approach this as if it's a different film rather than waiting for the one that some people's imaginations have been running riot over.

*Johnny Depp is no longer involved, I take it.*

TG: He's not. That's definite. I can now honestly say it. And maybe that's better as well. People can imagine what that film was going to be; now they're going to have the reality of what *this* film will be.

*Do you feel confident going into it a second time?*

TG: It feels fresh again. It doesn't feel like an old, tired thing. It's alive again. That's nice. It's weird, so many of the scenes are almost identical but they have a different resonance now. The first time, we were so desperate to get the thing going because it had failed a couple of times already. And when Johnny got involved, it became a game – which he was party to – of showing what a complete asshole he could be. I thought, 'Everybody thinks Johnny's so lovable but let's show his asshole side.' We made the character very unsympathetic and I think we overdid it. With the new version, I incorporated our own life into it. Now he's an advertising guy who ten years earlier had made a little film on Don Quixote that had done well at festivals, but who then ended up getting a job in commercials and never made a movie again because was making money. When he goes back to Spain and the village where he made the film, he discovers he's fucked up a lot of people's lives. It's a redemption story.

*Were you both angry when Tideland got hammered by the critics and didn't do any business? I know, Terry, you felt like the distributors let it down.*

JT: Often when you make a film that you believe in but it didn't make contact for whatever reason – the distribution or you didn't get it right – later it gets noticed by people. It's happened to me on a few films that I've been involved with, like *Eureka*. And now *Tideland*.

TG: A couple of months ago, I got an email from Phil Jupitus and he said, 'I just saw *Tideland*,' and he started raving about it: 'It's extraordinary, wonderful, brilliant, beautiful!' That's the great world we're living in now with DVDs – films don't die. It's not like when we were coming up and you'd go to a rep house to see an old, scratchy print. Last week at the Electric Cinema, they had a 'Tribute to Terry Gilliam' – it was all bullshit, but they showed *Time Bandits*. It was the first time I'd seen it on the big screen in 25 years and it looked like shit, it sounded like shit. It was the most depressing moment of my life.

JT: It should have been the digital master!

TG: Exactly. I sat there for two whole hours and it was horrible. I was so depressed that I went home and put on the DVD and said, 'Oh, there's the film I made!' It was wonderful, it was beautiful, the sound was there, the picture was there. I just want to get rid of film projection, frankly. Every time I look at my stuff digitally projected, it's like, *{Gasps in amazement}* 'There it is, the film we made!'

JT: Recently I've been seeing HD-SR projected in the cinemas and I have to say it's better than film. You see things that you never see on film.

TG: And some you don't want to... Film smoothes and softens and at the same time gets more detail. They need to work on that with digital. Seeing *Public Enemies* last week, I said, 'Johnny, don't do it...' Because I could see every pore! I don't want to see every pore on Johnny Depp's face.

*Are you interested in 3-D?*

TG: No. It's a nice gimmick. I saw a bit of *Avatar* a month ago. It's stunningly impressive but after a while, I don't care.

JT: I'm thinking about certain things that could be done in 3-D, not an action film or what we normally think of as 3-D genres but perhaps a film

What 'Gilliam curse'? I've gotten away with murder. I'm the luckiest guy out there. I get to do what I want to do and I'm probably lucky because I haven't had the opportunity to make as many bad films as other people because nobody gives me the money to do so.



about ballet. I think 3-D can be used by smaller films to make them more unique. *Avatar* is going to break 3-D and a lot of cinemas will be equipped for it. I think it's a distraction to date but maybe it'll have something more.

TG: I'm ambitious technically but I know in many cases I won't be able to say what I want to say with the techniques that cost loads of money. I'll do it cheaply because I'm more interested in the idea than the technique. I mean, *Avatar* is very impressive but I did find there's a problem – you've got to pump so much light through and because of the Polaroid glasses, you don't get whites. And I like a white. A white becomes a brownish grey because it's the colour of the glasses and, strangely enough, that flattens the image because even though you're doing 3-D, the contrast isn't so great. It should be called 2 and 3/4-D.

*You said earlier that you feel lucky but some people would say the opposite. You obviously don't buy into the theory that you're cursed.*

TG: What does that even *mean*? I've gotten away with murder. I'm the luckiest guy out there. I get to do what I want to do and I'm probably lucky

because I haven't had the opportunity to make as many bad films as other people because nobody gives me the money to do so. *{Laughs}* *But when Heath Ledger died during the making of Imaginarium...*

TG: It doesn't get worse than that. It just doesn't. It was... well, for me, it was just, 'Clearly there was a curse.' That was me being self-pitying for a moment. When somebody that close to you dies, you stop functioning and that's all I wanted to do – stop functioning and just go away. Unfortunately my co-workers wouldn't let me, and that's why I'm careful about the people I work with because I know in those kinds of situations that they're not gonna give up and they're gonna push me and shove me until we get this thing sorted out. And that's what happened. But it was hopefully a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

*Did it surprise you that so many people rallied around to get the film made?*

TG: They all did it for Heath. *Everybody* came to the rescue. Johnny, Colin and Jude rode in like heroes from a film. They worked for nothing – all the money went to his daughter... This doesn't happen in the real world, folks.



*Your daughter Amy says that you're a worst-case scenario kind of guy. Yet you seem fairly optimistic in the face of extreme challenges.*

TG: Listen, I'm talking to you. {Laughs} I've got a couple of faces. Once I'm around people, it's pretty good. But you don't want to be alone with me. When I get dark, it goes right to the pit...

*Beep!* Thomas, who switched himself off during the conversation about Ledger and begun fidgeting and fiddling, has also switched off my digital voice recorder. 'Oh dear,' he says, 'I'm not sure what I pushed.' Gilliam leans back in his chair in hysterics, while Thomas fumbles with the buttons trying to switch it back on, before sheepishly handing it back to me. 'I hope I haven't erased anything,' he says, with perhaps less than one hundred percent conviction. *Beep!* Crisis averted, conversation resumed...

*What's your attitude towards Hollywood these days?*

TG: It's there. If I saw a decent script come out of Hollywood, I'd do it. My three experiences of shooting a film in Hollywood with Hollywood money were the easiest of my life. *Tideland* was more fun, but in Hollywood it was a breeze because the resources are there. I've always had complete control of the films I did there and that was lucky because I didn't really have any major fights either. The independent ones have been more problematic.

JT: It's because they're problematic that they are independent. Otherwise

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they would have been gobbled up by the machine in one easy chomp.

*Are you still reading many Hollywood scripts?*

TG: No, I don't have a Hollywood agent anymore. I got rid of him. I didn't want to read crap scripts anymore, I've read too many of them. And they all got made; millions and millions were spent on them, hundreds of millions in some cases.

*Even at your lowest ebb you never once considered, 'Maybe I should just go to Hollywood and become a director for hire?' Coppola did it...*

TG: I don't know how to do that. I'm not a director, I'm a filmmaker. There is a difference. I was watching *Mississippi Burning* last night – it's a really good film but I couldn't make that. Alan Parker is a film director; I'm a guy who makes things that possess me. {Giggles} It's a catharsis is what I'm basically after – I'm a cathartic. Jeremy, are you a cathartic?

JT: Sephardic.

TG: {Laughing} Cath-artists? That's great. Do you want to be a cath-artist? A Sephardic cathartist!

*Has the industry changed radically in the last twenty years?*

JT: Yes but the desires are the same, which is to make good stories in an original way. People want to see stories told in different ways and you just have to move with that. You change or die.

*Jeremy, you once said the digital revolution would herald a new golden age for independent filmmaking.*

JT: I want to believe that.

TG: Digital brings the costs down, that's for sure. It just doesn't seem to get organised properly. It's distribution that's a problem. You go to a festival and there's this whole world of cinema and then you see what actually arrives on London screens – anything that comes from outside America and England – and it's a handful at best. You get your Haneke, you get your Almodovar, and that's about it.

JT: There are a lot of important films that never get shown here now, films that are key works at festivals.

TG: That's why festivals have become really important, except a film can't make its money back at festivals. Nothing comes back so how on earth do you make money to make the next film? This is what's so awful when you see these fantastic writers and directors, and nobody but festival-goers get to see their films. But on the level of being able to find films on DVD, we're living in an incredible time. I can put my hands on any film I want and see it on my 52-inch screen with 5.1 surround sound. For a couple of hundred quid you end up with a sound system that's better than half the cinemas you go to. I went to see *Brüno* at the Holloway Odeon and it was an extraordinary crowd in there but there was something about sitting in the cinema that was depressing. There was no presentation... I said, 'I really would be happier just sitting at home.'

JT: And not laughing as much.

TG: It *was* nice with a crowd of people in there, hearing them all gasping. It's the perfect film for a big crowd of people. Everyone screaming. 'Oh my god, no!'

JT: {Looking at his watch} Listen, I'm...

TG: Oh shit, yes. We should wrap up.

JT: We've got to phone somebody in Spain... to realise the dream.

TG: *You* are holding up Don Quixote. {Laughs}

*I don't want that responsibility. Last question then... What do you most admire about each other?*

TG: He likes what I do. {Howls}

JT: We're just, you know... we're good friends.

TG: Yeah, that's what it's about. What are friends? People who are just good to hang out with. We have good conversations, we share a lot of things in common... He's good at what he does, I hope I'm as good at what I do.

JT: Shared knowledge is good. Shared experience. And similar ideas.

TG: Look at Jeremy's list of films – I can't think of another producer who's done that. He's mad, passionate, committed. That's a rare thing to find.

JT: There are not many of us left in the boroughs of London.

TG: That's the advantage of being in the London film business. There are so many reasons why one is in Hollywood but here, it's because they love films and they're serious about what they do. It's great. And we always wait for the others to fail. {Laughs} *Schadenfreude* rules the industry, doesn't it? In the healthiest possible way.

JT: *Schadenfreude* is popular.

TG: "I love Steven /but/..." {Giggles} That's part of the fun of it.

*This time next year, all things being equal, you'll be close to finishing with Don Quixote...*

TG: Steady on! Hopefully we'll be in the editing room. {Deep sigh} At least we've got our screenplay. Except for spelling out what *Auto Da Fe* means. What's your take on *Auto Da Fé*? You know what I mean, right?

*I'm afraid not.*

TG: Ah, there you go... {Turning to Jeremy and laughing} You win.

*\*Auto Da Fe*– Literally, 'Act of Faith'. During the Spanish Inquisition, a religious ritual of penance undergone by convicted heretics before they were burned at the stake. So now you know.



Clockwise from top left...  
*The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009), *The Last Emperor* (1987), *Brazil* (1985), *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009),  
*Crash* (1996), *Bad Timing* (1980), *Naked Lunch* (1991), *Brazil* (1985)