

CHRIS MCMANUS: WITTGENSTEIN WOULD HAVE WHISTLED ALONG

MONTY PYTHON'S SPAMALOT
Palace Theatre, London

Had he lived two decades longer, an 80-year-old Wittgenstein could have watched the inspired lunacies of the first two series of Monty Python. And then wouldn't one have wanted to be a fly on the wall over the Trinity television set, observing the reactions of the philosopher who once said that "Humour is not a mood, but a way of looking at the world", and had hoped to write a philosophy book consisting entirely of jokes.

Lest one has forgotten, in Monty Python's *The Bruces' Philosophers Song*, Wittgenstein "was a beery swine who was just as sloshed as Schlegel". And in Monty Python's *Fliegender Zirkus*, he wore the No 9 shirt rather anachronistically for Germany in the International Philosophy finals in Munich. In what otherwise would have been a 0-0 draw, Wittgenstein was substituted in the last minute by Marx seconds before Socrates (who "himself, was permanently pissed") headed the winning goal for Greece.

Spamalot, a Monty Python musical, sounds incongruous, even for those expecting the unexpected. Apparently, the other Pythons also had their doubts, being convinced only by Eric Idle's tape of *The Song that Goes like*



DONALD COOPER

This (well, that, and getting a one-third share in the show for doing almost nothing). Coming midway through Act I and lifting the production from a slowish start, the song spoofs those big Andrew Lloyd Webber power ballads. "Once in ev'ry show, there comes a song like this. It starts off soft and low, and ends up with a kiss." (Later it reprises as, "Twice in ev'ry show there comes...").

Spamalot parodies every faux-serious musical ever written, manipulating, twisting and revealing the true superficiality of all the

cheap clichés, devices and tricks devised to wring gratuitous, glib, glutinously cloying sentiment from a Broadway audience. Very, very funny really does rather understate it.

Other minds may be unknowable, but I suspect that the dry, gnomic Wittgenstein might have liked *Spamalot*, for in that breast did also beat an intriguingly trashy, endearingly human, heart. He loved hard-boiled detective novels and American films, Westerns in particular, but also musicals with big production numbers — *Top Hat*, with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, was a favourite. *Spamalot*

with its "routines and chorus scenes/ With footwork impeccable", might just have hit the button.

Identifying the locus of Monty Python's humour is difficult, but partly it comes from a dissection, itself reflexive, of the very nature of comedy. It is as purely modernist and as quintessentially Cambridge as the language games that so concerned the later Wittgenstein. In similar spirit, while seeming to play along, *Spamalot* ruthlessly anatomises the games of the musical.

Few people go to musicals for the words, those artificial bridges linking one song to the next; but *Spamalot* is completely different. Long, verbatim textual chunks of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* are treated as holy writ by an audience that clearly knew much by heart and greeted each one from the heart. Inevitably they recognised *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* as a migrant from a completely different Python film, but that did not stop them, just a few seconds in, from whistling along.

And perhaps Wittgenstein would have joined in, too. As a proficient whistler of Schubert *Lieder*, he surely would have recognised the deep truth of "When you're chewing on life's gristle, don't grumble. Give a whistle!".

Chris McManus is professor of psychology and medical education at University College London.