

## Judge Dennis Davis | Reviewing British comedy "Fawlty Towers"

Trudy approached me and said in August we should do something more lighthearted, a whole range of talks and discussions that should perhaps put us all in a good mood. And she said to me, "Can't you do something on comedy?" And for that reason, I thought, "Why not Fawlty Towers?" I should tell you, just before I start, that the sheer delight of going through these episodes and putting out clips of them have been such fun. I hope you also find them as amusing as I do.

It is interesting when you think about it that Fawlty Towers really was broadcast in 1975 on BBC2, six episodes. Four years later, there was season two, another six episodes, and that was it. Fawlty Towers only has 12 episodes, and yet it's had legendary status. It has been one of the greatest sitcoms of all time. It is regarded as one of the great comedy pieces of all time. John Cleese as Basil Fawlty is regarded as truly one of the extraordinary characters of modern sitcom comedy and rightly so. It is interesting, and it will be interesting in your reaction, as to whether now, given the age of wokeness and the care which one has to take to say very many things, whether it'd be possible to have launched Fawlty Towers now. Although it is really interesting to me that in researching this, just how much material there is on it and how there are Fawlty Towers restaurants and so on and so forth. And recently there've been quite a few documentaries on Fawlty Towers, so it remains, as it were, these extraordinary 12 half-hour episodes that were done more than 40 years ago. Quite extraordinary. So let me just talk a little bit about it.

John Cleese says that he basically modelled Fawlty Towers, and Basil Fawlty in particular, on a fellow called Sinclair who was a hotelier in Torquay. It turned out that in 1971, the Monty Python's Flying Circus landed up in Torquay. They were filming for one of the first of the Monty Pythons, and they came to this hotel where they stayed, and apparently this fellow Sinclair was the basis on which Basil Fawlty was modelled. Apparently he was an extraordinarily irascible, irritable person. John Cleese said, "he ran the hotel on the basis that the hotels were splendid things to run if there were no guests". And he talks about this in an interview that he and Connie Booth, who he was married to at the time, and who were thinking about another show, they got the inspiration through this fellow. When the Monty Python people were all at this hotel, all sorts of strange things happened. One of the Monty Python people, I think it was Michael Palin, asked Sinclair the hotelier if they could get a call in the morning to wake them up because they had to go and film. And he said, "What time do you want us to wake you up?" And Palin said, "Quarter to seven." And in true Basil Fawlty style, this fellow Sinclair said, "Quarter to to seven?! You want me to wake you up, then I've got to get out of bed, make breakfast for you, make sure that you are all right. I mean, never mind!" and screamed at him for five minutes, even though he was a guest. One of the others, I think Eric, said that

apparently he'd left his bag at the door of the hotel where they were staying. And he suddenly realised this and came back. And so he went to Sinclair, said, "I left my bag here." And Sinclair said, "Yes, it's there all the way behind the white wall beyond the swimming pool." To which he said, "Well, why did you put it there?" Which the answer was, "I didn't know, it could have been a bomb." To which Eric apparently says to him, "A bomb?!". He said "Yes, we've been having quite a lot of trouble with staff recently". And it was that sort of eccentricity and totally dislikable character that John Cleese and Connie Booth decided that they were going to do these scripts and they were going to base it on this particular experience that they had in this hotel. And that Sinclair was the model for Basil Fawlty. Before we even go further, let me play you the first clip, cause it gives me a sense of what in fact is going on. If I start laughing in the middle of this, I'm sorry, but for me, these are all very iconically funny scenes.

(A video clip of "Fawlty Towers")

- Basil Fawlty: Manuel, there is too much butter on those trays.
- Manuel: Que?
- Fawlty: There is too much butter on those trays.
- Manuel: No, no, no Señor! Not "on those trays." No, sir, "Uno, dos, très."
- Fawlty: No, no. Hay much burro alli!
- Manuel: Que?
- Fawlty: Hay much burro alli!
- Manuel: Ah, mantequilla!
- Fawlty: What? Que?
- Manuel: Mantequilla. Burro is...is hee-haw.
- Fawlty: What?
- Manuel: Burro...burro is hee-haw, hee-haw.
- Fawlty: Manuel, por favor. Uno memento.
- Manuel: Si, si, si.
- Sybil: What's the matter, Basil?

- Fawlty: Nothing, dear, I'm just dealing with it.
- Manuel: He speak good, how you say...?
- Sibyl: English
- Fawlty: Mantequilla, solamente, dos.
- Manuel: Dos?
- Sybil: Well, don't look at me, you're the one who's supposed to be able to speak it.
- Fawlty: Those, two pieces! Two each! Arriba, arriba!
- Manuel: Si Señor.
- Sybil: I don't know why you wanted to hire him, Basil.
- Fawlty: Because he's cheap and keen to learn, dear. And in this day and age such...
- Sybil: But why would you say you could speak the language?
- Fawlty: I learned classical Spanish, not the strange dialect he seems to have picked up.
- Sibyl: It'd be quicker to train a monkey.

There you are, that's the first clip. It says so much. It talks about what he was trying to do here with an utterly irascible, misanthropic, snob, short-tempered. How are you able to create a character, you may ask, who ultimately was so dislikable, and yet became so iconic? It's really a true achievement of Cleese's genius as a comic figure. And of course in that particular clip I've played you, some of the themes that I want to pick up later are quite apparent. Manuel is from Barcelona, he's cheap, he's exploited, he's a foreigner, not one of ours. And so the kind of almost British nationalism of the time, and we could argue that it's not just in the 1970s, it still applies, comes up. So he's created this character who shows a whole range of extraordinarily kind of xenophobic exploitative tendencies. We've also been introduced to Manuel, Andrew Sachs, what a performance throughout as the Spanish waiter who speaks very little English and is regarded as the bumbling fool who's the butt of Cleese's abuse. And we of course have also been introduced to his wife, Sybil. Of course what is also particularly interesting is the way in which the physical relationship, John Cleese being extraordinarily tall, she being quite short as Sybil of course, is played by Prunella Scales. She's clearly far more competent than he is. But it's hilarious, every time she

calls him, 'Basil', he'd tremble. So there's this wonderful kind of strange relationship.

We will of course come now to the second episode where Cleese's then wife, Connie Booth, appears and she's the one sane person in this entire programme, which of course makes it even funnier. So let's watch her and this interaction.

(A video clip of "Fawlty Towers")

- Hotel guest: ...dealing with him. Now, Glendower Street.
- Guest: Isn't there anyone else in attendance? Really, this is the most appalling service!
- Polly: What a good idea! Manuel, could you lend Mrs. Richards your assistance in connection with her reservation?
- Guest: Now, I've reserved a very quiet room with a bath and sea view. I specifically asked for a sea view in my written confirmation, so please make sure I have it.
- Manuel: Qué?
- Guest: What?
- Manuel: Qué?
- Guest: K?
- Manuel: Sí.
- Guest: C?
- Guest: KC? What are you trying to say?
- Manuel: No, no, no, no. Qué? What. Sí. Qué?...What.
- Guest: C.K. Watt?
- Manuel: Yes!
- Guest: Who is C.K. Watt?
- Manuel: Qué?
- Guest: Is he the manager, Mr Watt?

- Manuel: Manager!
- Guest: He is?
- Manuel: Ah, Mr Fawltty!
- Guest: What?
- Manuel: Fawltty!
- Guest: What are you talking about you silly little man?
- Fawltty: What is going on here?
- Guest: I ask him for my room and he tells me the manager's  
a Mr Watt, aged 40.
- Manuel: No. No, no. Fawltty.
- Guest: "Fawltty"? What's wrong with him?
- Fawltty: It's all right, Mrs. Richards. He's from  
Barcelona.
- Guest: The manager's from Barcelona?
- Manuel: No, no, no. He's from Swanage.
- Polly: And you're in 22.
- Guest: What?
- Polly: You're in room 22. Manuel, take these cases up  
to 22, will you?
- Fawltty: Madam, don't think me rude, but may I ask, do  
you by any chance have a hearing aid?
- Guest: A what?
- Fawltty: A hearing aid!
- Guest: Yes, I do have a hearing aid.
- Fawltty: Would you like me to get it mended?
- Guest: Mended? It's working perfectly all right.
- Fawltty: No, it isn't!

- Guest: I haven't got it turned on at the moment.
- Fawlty: Why not?
- Guest: The battery runs down.
- Guest: Now, what sort of a reduction are you going to give me on this room?
- Fawlty [quietly]: 60% if you turn it on.
- Guest: What?
- Fawlty: My wife handles all such matters. I'm sure she will be delighted to discuss it with you.
- Guest: I shall speak to her after lunch.
- Fawlty: You heard that all right, didn't you?
- Guest: What?
- Fawlty: Thank you so much. Lunch will be served at half past 12:00.
- Fawlty: Turn it on.
- Guest: What?
- Fawlty: Turn it...turn it on!
- Guest: I can't read that. I need my glasses. Where are they?
- Polly: They're on your head, Mrs. Richards.
- Guest: I've lost them. They're the only pair I've got. I can't read a thing without them.
- Polly: Excuse me!
- Guest: Now, I have them this morning....
- Fawlty: Mrs. Richards...
- Guest: When I was buying the vase... I put them on to look at it, and then I had them at tea time...!
- Fawlty: Mrs. RICHARDS YOUR GLASSES ARE THERE!

- Guest: There? Well who put them in there? Well, what have you got to say for yourself?
- Fawlty: [speaking quietly]
- Guest: What? Wait, wait, wait. I haven't got it turned up enough.
- Sibyl: Basil!
- Fawlty [yelling]: I said...!
- Guest: Oh, my head, my head!
- Fawlty: Has it come away?
- Sibyl: Did you bang your head?
- Guest: Yes! Yes!
- Sibyl: Oh, dear. Let me have a look.
- Fawlty: You'd better go and lie down before something else happens.
- Sibyl [to Basil]: Shut up!
- Guest: Why don't you call the police?
- Sibyl: We will, the moment we've searched the rooms.
- Guest: My money's been taken!
- Sibyl: Yes, yes, I know. Try not to speak.
- Fawlty: Is this a piece of your brain?

What is extraordinary is just that he's a hotelier and the level of sort of almost snobbishness towards the half-deaf woman and his complete disregard for her. And the manner in which he does it is just utterly extraordinary. And so what you've got, which is the genius of it, is the way Cleese is able to have a character that never learns from these mistakes. Always and invariably gets himself into trouble and yet continues to abuse people in this particular way, and moves, as it were, from manic to abusive. Now, John Cleese himself has suggested that there was a lot of anger in him about British society at the time. Still is, I think. And he has said in interviews, that when he did Basil Fawlty, some of that was really him. Some of that mania was him, in the sense that he really couldn't stand the snobbish class-based attitude of British people. And so he's in a sense

internalising that in the character of Basil Fawlty.

Now if we then go to the next clip where we start to look at the service which ultimately is provided. We start with Mrs. Richards again. But there are quite a number of them. Again, you just see the genius of being able, as it were, to interact with Manuel always in the picture as the second tier of abnormality in this bizarre hotel. So let's have a look at this particular clip, it's quite extraordinary.

(A video clip of "Fawlty Towers")

- Fawlty: Good morning, madam. Can I help you?
- Guest: Are you the manager?
- Fawlty: I am the owner, madam.
- Guest: What?
- Fawlty: I am the owner.
- Guest: I want to speak to the manager.
- Fawlty: I am the manager, too.
- Guest: What?
- Fawlty: I am the manager as well.
- Manuel: Manager. He manager.
- Guest: Oh, you're Watt.
- Fawlty: I'm the manager!
- Guest: What?
- Fawlty: I'm the manager!
- Guest: Yes, I know. You've just told me. What's the matter with you? Now listen to me. I booked a room with a bath. When I book a room with a bath, I expect to get a bath.
- Fawlty: You've got a bath.
- Guest: I'm not paying seven pounds, 20 pence per night, plus V.A.T., for a room without a bath!



- Fawlty: Here is your bath.
- Guest: You call that a bath? It's not big enough to drown a mouse. It's disgraceful!
- Fawlty: I wish you were a mouse. I'd show you.
- Guest: And another thing. I asked for a room with a view.
- Fawlty: Deaf, mad and blind. This is the view as far as I can remember, madam. Yes, yes, this is it.
- Guest: When I pay for a view, I expect something more interesting than that.
- Fawlty: That is Torquay, madam.
- Guest: That is not good enough.
- Fawlty: Well, may I ask what you were expecting to see out of a Torquay hotel bedroom window? Sydney Opera House, perhaps? The Hanging Gardens of Babylon? Herds of wildebeest sweeping majestically...
- Guest: Don't be silly. I expect to be able to see the sea.
- Fawlty: You can see the sea. It's over there between the land and the sky.
- Guest: I need a telescope to see that.
- Fawlty: Well, may I suggest that you consider moving to a hotel closer to the sea? Or preferably in it.
- Guest: Right. Now, listen to me. I'm not satisfied, but I've decided to stay here. However, I should expect a reduction.
- Fawlty: Why, because Krakatoa's not erupting at the moment?
- Guest: Because the room is cold, the bath is too small, the view is invisible, and the radio doesn't work.
- Fawlty: No, the radio works. You don't.
- Guest: What?
- Fawlty: I'll see if I can fix it, you scabby old bat.

- Fawlty: I think we got something then!
- Guest: What?
- Fawlty: I think we got something then!
- Guest: What are you doing?
- Manuel: QUE?
- Fawlty: Madam, don't think me rude, but may I ask, do you by any chance have a hearing aid?
- Guest: A what?
- Fawlty: A hearing aid!
- Guest: Yes, I do have a hearing aid.
- Fawlty: Would you like me to get it mended?
- Guest: Mended? It's working perfectly all right.
- Fawlty: No it isn't!
- Guest: I haven't got it turned on at the moment.
- Fawlty: Why not?
- Guest: The battery runs down. Now, what sort of reduction are you going to give me on this room?
- Fawlty: 60% If you turn it on.
- Guest: What?
- Fawlty: My wife handles all such matters. I'm sure she will be delighted to discuss it with you.
- Guest: I shall speak to her after lunch.
- Fawlty: You heard that all right, didn't you?
- Guest: What?
- Fawlty: Thank you so much. Lunch will be served at half past 12:00.

It's just extraordinary the way he's able to be so abusive in that

sort of slightly English-posh way, or trying to pretend to be.

And if we move on, Judi to I think the next clip, we see a little bit more of this quite acutely. No, sorry, is this clip four? In which case, what I wanted to show you here, before I get there, we've already discussed the abusive nature which he has to the guests. What is particularly interesting to me is that there are a series of themes which are developed. In short, if you ask about Fawlty Towers in terms of analysing it, in a way what he's done is there's this little community in the hotel. It represents to some extent the family of a nation. Because we see there's Manuel, you've got these strange guests, you've got the relatively normal Polly, and you've got on the other hand, that the wife, and issues of race, class, and gender come up. But also what comes up is of course the obsession with sex. And a number of the episodes deal with the question of Basil Fawlty's absolute obsession with men bringing women into his hotel. And essentially the kind of prudish English approach to sex generally, certainly at that time, and he plays very heavily on this.

Just watch this clip as a point for that.

(A video clip of "Fawlty Towers")

- Fawlty: Manuel, Manuel, quick. Come on! Quick!
- Manuel: Oh... 'elp... Socorro! Socorro! 'elp! 'elp!
- Sibyl: Basil. Basil?
- Manuel: Mrs. Fawlty, Mrs. Fawlty! Mrs. Fawlty, Mr. Fawlty -
- Sibyl: What?
- Manuel: He hurt. He fall of ladder!
- Sibyl: Off a ladder?
- Manuel: Sí, sí. Come, come, come.
- Sibyl: What was he doing up a ladder?
- Manuel: He try to see girl.
- Sibyl: What?
- Manuel: He try to see in room to see girl. She make him crazy. Come, come, come.
- Sibyl: I see.

- Manuel: I tell him careful, but he go to see girl.
- Sibyl: Right.
- Fawlty: Hello, dear. I was just going to, uh...
- Fawlty: What the....
- Fawlty: What in God's name do you think you're doing?  
What did you hit me for?
- Sibyl: How dare you! How dare you!
- Fawlty: Have you gone mad? What's got into you?
- Sibyl: You really don't know?
- Fawlty: No, I don't.
- Sibyl: What were you doing up that ladder? Come on!
- Fawlty: I was trying to see the girl. Is that so  
strange?
- Fawlty: Stop hitting me!
- Sibyl: Get away from this door and don't you dare try  
and come in here tonight.
- Fawlty: She's gone completely mad.
- Manuel: Crazy, she got crazy. I say to her, you try to  
see in girl's room, and she go crazy.
- Fawlty: What?
- Manuel: I tell her, you go to see girl, in room, You crazy  
about this girl, okay? Okay, so... You go up to try  
to look at her and Mrs. Fawlty, she go crazy.
- Fawlty: You crazy little dago! Now, that's how an  
Englishman would do it, you see? Now, a German, a  
German would go... No, that's enough for tonight.  
All right, we'll go on with your training in the  
morning. We're just training him in the art of hotel  
management. It's rather interesting actually. He's  
from Barcelona, and one of the more...

Of course the context of this one is his obsession with sex. So he is

trying to get up the ladder in order to see whether this man has brought a woman, which he deeply resents. There are a couple of episodes which deal with this particular issue, the particularly anal way in which a certain class of English deal with issues of sex. And he plays on that quite a lot. Of course, what you would see if you are watching the whole episode is the woman that we see in the screen at the moment, she and her husband are psychologists, and of course the hilarious set of exchanges, because he knows that they are psychologists, and he is trying to behave normally. So you've got this absurdity and if you look at the way of physical comedy, in which he sort of walks and manoeuvres himself, and of course the way Manuel is treated quite outrageously throughout, makes for this incredible character.

You have to ask yourself a question. How is it that somebody who's so misanthropic, so rude, so unbelievably inappropriate is such an almost lovable character? He is truly one of the favourite comic characters that Cleeve has created. Of course it is true that if you look at some of the other films that Cleeve has done, you'll see much of the same thing occurring. But what I'm trying to convey is that there's something quite important here, that what they're doing in this strange little Torquay hotel, is in fact having a serious conversation about the English and about certain forms of English national identity.

I can't play you more of all the episodes, I wish I could, but I mean there's for example the relationship between the cook. Those of you who know Fawlty Towers will know the cook's name is Terry, and there's a kind of interrelationship between the working class cook and Basil who really, in a sense looks down upon the working class in this way. God alone knows why, but he does. There is of course the whole question of various different categories of people. We see in some of the episodes the Major, representing a sort of Victorian Britain, who emerges out of old Imperial Britain. Basil, of course, is the postwar Britain with all these conventional values. And then you've got the more normal Polly in this particular regard.

So the whole point I'm trying to make is that in some extraordinary way, Fawlty Towers is an ideological discourse about forms of nationality at that particular point in time. Whether it still works is another matter. Although I suspect because we find it so funny, that perhaps to some extent it does. And of course it raises a really interesting question, which I want to come back to, which is the role of humour, but we'll get there.

Let's have a look then at the next clip, which basically reinforces some of what I've been talking about, if we could. Not that one, we've done that one. Well, actually before we get to the Germans, which of course is perhaps the most classic of all, let me talk a little bit about the question of humour and Fawlty Towers. What is so

particularly interesting about this is what kind of humour are we seeing here? We're certainly in a sense laughing at humour which in many ways at that time was a safety valve for a whole range of anti-social impulses. So for example, we're going to come to the Germans now, where in fact the whole subject of nationalism, the idea that the British will never quite come to terms with the Germans. It becomes an apparent feature. We also see in this particular way, in which Manuel, as I keep on saying, he's the other, he's this kind of regarded as this uneducated man from Barcelona. He's cheap, he can be treated in this outrageous way, and I must say the manner in which Andrew Sachs plays Manuel is truly nothing short of extraordinary. And so what they've done in Fawlty Towers is to essentially allow us to use humor as a safety valve for antisocial social impulses, I think, in a particular way. We even laugh at Manuel. Is that because we've got some particular feeling about foreigners or immigrants and we are able to laugh quite easily at their stupidity? Comedy at the time gave us the permission to do that. Whether in fact it still gives us permission to act against certain norms and rules in society is another question. It's also true that throughout Fawlty Towers we're able to deal with taboo subjects. Whether it is the kind of foreigner, or in the particular case I want to show you now, joking about World War II and the relationship of the Germans and the English. A subject which for a long time wasn't openly discussed, but which in this particular clip that I'm about to deal with, is truly one of the most extraordinary episodes of comedy that you can see.

What it shows as well is this just incredible way in which the character of Basil Fawlty moves through the world. In other words, he never, ever learns from his mistakes. He's always of the view that he's one ahead of everything, but in fact he's always behind the game. So the strange thing is that this incredibly buffoon character, the way it's played is that he sort of thinks he's basically managed to get through the problem and we know that he never does and never learns from it. And so what Fawlty Towers does, it seems to me, is to expose a whole kaleidoscope of different contradictory attitudes in Britain of the 1970s. We can ask ourselves after this how much that still applies today. I'd be interested in your view, but let's just have a look at, this is perhaps for me, perhaps, the most classic of all of the Fawlty Tower scenes. I've had to choose obviously five or six. But this one is just fantastic.

(A video clip of "Fawlty Towers")

- Fawlty: Polly, are these Germans, too?
- Polly: Oh, yes, but I can deal with it.
- Fawlty: Right, right. Here's the plan: I'll stand there and ask them if they want something to drink before the war, before their lunch! Before their lunch. Don't

mention the war.

- German guests: Can we help you?
- Fawlty: Oh, you speak English?
- Guests: Of course.
- Fawlty: Ah, wonderful! Wunderbar! Ah. Please allow me to introduce myself. I am the owner of Fawlty Towers and may I welcome your war.... you war.... you all, you all, and hope that your stay will be a happy one. Now, would you like to eat first or would you like a drink before the war?
- Fawlty: --ning...that trespassers will be tied up with piano wire. Sorry, sorry, trouble with the old leg. Got a touch of shrapnel in the war. Korean! Korean War! Sorry, Korean.
- Guests: Thank you. We will eat now.
- Fawlty: Ah, good, please, do allow me. May I say how pleased we are to have some Europeans here now that we are on the continent?
- Polly [on the phone]: Can I speak to Dr. Fin please?
- Fawlty: I didn't vote for it myself, quite honestly, but now that we're in, I'm determined to make it work, so I'd like to welcome you all to Britain. The place is grilled, but that doesn't matter. there's life in the old thing yet... Wait a moment, I got a bit confused there, oh yes, the place is grilled..... In fact, the whole room's warm, isn't it? I'll open a window, have a look... and the veal chop is done with rosemary... that's funny, I thought she'd gone to Canada... and is delicious and nutritious, in fact, it's veally good. Veally good, ha ha!
- Guest: The veal is good?
- Fawlty: Yes, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, never mind.
- Another guest: May we have two eggs mayonnaises, please?
- Fawlty: Certainly. Why not? Why not, indeed? We are all friends now, eh?

- Guest: A prawn cocktail.
- Fawlty: All in the market together, all differences forgotten, and no need at all to mention the war. Sorry, sorry, sorry, what was it again?
- Guest: A prawn cocktail.
- Fawlty: Prawn, that was it. When you said prawn, I thought you said war. Oh, the war, oh, yes, completely slipped my mind, yes, I'd forgotten all about it. Hitler, Himmler and all that lot, yes, completely forgotten it, just like that. Sorry, what was it again?
- Guest: A prawn cocktail!
- Fawlty: Oh, yes, Eva Prawn, yes, and Goebbels too, another one I can hardly remember at all.
- Guest: And a pickled herring.
- Fawlty: Hermann Goering, yes, yes. And Von Ribbentrop, that was another one.
- Guest: And four cold meat salads, please.
- Fawlty: Certainly. Well, I'll just get your hors d'oeuvres, hors d'oeuvres which must be obeyed at all times without question. Sorry, sorry, sorry.
- Polly: Mr. Fawlty, would you please call your wife immediately?
- Fawlty: Sybil! Sybil... She's in the hospital, you silly girl.
- Polly: Yes, call her there.
- Fawlty: I can't, I've got too much to do. Listen, don't mention the war. I mentioned it once, but I think I got away with it all right. So, it's all forgotten now and let's hear no more about it. So that's two eggs mayonnaise, a prawn Goebbels, a Herman Goering, and four colditz salads. Wait a moment, I got a bit confused here. Sorry, I got a bit confused 'cause everyone keeps mentioning the war. So could you... What's the matter?
- [Guest crying]



- Another guest: It's all right.
- Fawlty: Is there something wrong?
- Guest: Will you stop talking about the war?
- Fawlty: Me? You started it!
- Guest: We did not start it.
- Fawlty: Yes, you did, you invaded Poland. Here, blow, here, this'll cheer you up. You'll like this one: There's this woman, she's completely stupid, she'd never remember anything, and her husband's in a bomber over Berlin, oh sorry, oh sorry, here, here she'll love this one, she'll laugh...
- Guest: Leave her alone.
- Fawlty: No, this is a scream. I have never seen anyone not laugh at this.
- Guest: Go away!
- Fawlty: Look, she'll love it, she's German!
- Polly: No, Mr. Fawlty!
- Fawlty: What?
- Polly: Do Jimmy Cagney instead.
- Fawlty: What?
- Polly: Jimmy Cagney.
- Fawlty: Jimmy Cagney?
- Polly: You know, "You dirty rat."
- Fawlty: I can't do Jimmy Cagney.
- Polly: Please try, "I'm going to get you."
- Fawlty: Shut up.
- Polly: Here, watch. Who's this then?
- [Judge Davis] Judi? Is that the last one I've got or there

more?

- [Judi] No, that's the last one.

Yes I had one that I've forgotten about. Oh, it doesn't matter. I did have another one, but I must have forgot to send to Judi. I'm so sorry about that but let's analyze this for a moment.

Firstly, I mean the physical range of comedy that Cleese does, by the way, the Nazi war thing is done in another scenario. But the idea, I mean just conceive of the way in which this was done, in which he first says "Don't mention the war" to start with, and then he says, "I think I got away with it". The level of bumbling, the level of being able to fool himself, that in fact it's all fine. And then in a sense, exploring the fundamental issue at the time, which is what the relationship was between Germans and English, thanks to the Second World War. Only in a situation like this could it be examined. And so what we've, I mean, and then of course you do get, and of course in many of the others will see this more, the role played by his then-wife, Connie Booth, who plays Polly Sherman. She's the hotel maid, she's the only sensible character here. She's trying to deflect Cleese by saying play Jimmy Cagney. But of course he is so obsessed with the war, there he is.

And so you've got consistently a mix of characters, all which to a large degree are interfaced one with each other. And essentially the effectiveness of Basil is because to some extent of these supporting characters, there's Basil's wife, she's the antithesis of Basil. To some extent, she's competent and she's polite when she's not basically behaving as some form of English kugel. Then of course Manuel, who as we know, Andrew Sachs, what a brilliant performance Andrew Sachs has throughout these 12 episodes. But he's a dimwitted and well-meaning waiter from Barcelona with a limited grasp of English. How he's managed to do that without roaring with laughter in each programme, your guess is as good as mine. And so what we've got, and he essentially is the butt of both the temperamental mania of the Cleese character, who at sometimes is just bloody rude, to put it bluntly, at other times is manic, and the third times really shows a violent rage, which is quite extraordinary. And it's that ability that they did in 12 episodes to integrate these characters into a kaleidoscope of a particular society.

Of course, the various guests who come in, Mrs. Richards, a slightly upper class, half-deaf person who's basically, again, assailed for her disability. I mean, the sort of thing that one wouldn't think twice or three times about doing now. And the prejudices are attached there too. Manuel, as I've indicated consistently, the idea about the Germans, that the fact that you play that episode in circumstances where you're utterly oblivious of the feelings of the Germans. And we laugh like hell rather uncomfortably, I suppose in some ways. And yet,

it effectively is one of the most iconic scenes in all of modern day comedy. In effect, I think what these episodes show you is something that Larry David, of course, as you know, was famous for the conception of Seinfeld. He said that what you've got to do is this, what he called "the no-hugging, no-learning" policy, meaning there are no moral lessons, there's no growing or learning from episodes. The principle that is adopted throughout all 12 episodes of Fawlty Towers is that Basil doesn't change his outlook on life. Manuel never becomes more fluent in English from the moment we meet him. The viewer doesn't need to know anything more about the characters and shows than what's contained in a single episode. And actually, whether you want to watch episode 1 or to episode 12 first is totally irrelevant. In this sense it succeeds because it's been able, as it were, to a large degree, to play to all our prejudices, well, certainly the prejudices of the time, and reflect on the question of the discussion on national identity through the theme of comedy. It's a remarkable achievement.

And what is interesting is people often ask, well, why were there no more episodes? Well, the interesting aspect about that, if I can just tell you, is that when the show started, there was some great deal of reluctance of playing any of them. Six episodes in 1975, you'd be fascinated to know that the first episode cost no more than 20,000 pounds, which even then, I suppose wasn't a lot of money. And that Cleeve only made 400 pounds in the episode. They did 12 episodes, six in '75, and six in '79 and decided it was impossible to do any more.

And that in itself is the genius of it. The genius of it is to realise that actually this isn't the show that can go on forever. That to a large degree you've done what you can with the themes that you've got and you must move on. And so, I mean, I could have shown you all sorts of other of the 12 programmes. Some of you may remember there's the wonderful one about the Basil, sorry, about Manuel's pet rat and this comes before the health inspector arrives. The hotel inspectors, where he fears that he's insulted an undercover hotel inspector, but he doesn't know who it is. Which in a sense treats all the guests nicely for a moment. There of course is the one of the Waldorf salad, with the irate American. Again, reflecting on the kind of American arrogance and the way the Brits look down at the Americans. In fact, one of the points that Palin said about, or Cleeve said, about Sinclair, the hotelier who upon the whole thing was modelled, was actually precisely that Sinclair came down and said, you know, "We don't eat like this in this country, even if you Americans do". So what they've done is to have created this extraordinary set of episodes of a person who's always looking on the cheap, never learns anything, is hugely prejudicial against foreigners, who has a particular obsession about sex. There's a wonderful programme as well, which is the one I've forgotten, and I'm so sorry about that, dealing with the Australian woman and the extraordinary interchange Basil has with her.

And all of them, ultimately, focus I think on various forms of British prejudice and anger, which Cleese basically focused on. But when for example, you realise that he has this idea that nothing has gone wrong, when you go back to the Germans, he insists on greeting the German guests, and that is certainly one of the most funny moments of modern comedy, "Don't mention the war". And seeing him make matters worse over the course of a few minutes. It's just incredible, with the low point of his tirade, the long-limb goose-stepping of Basil holding one finger on the nose like an Adolph Hitler moustache while the others held it off in the Nazi salute. And so the combination of physical comedy, which Cleese was so wonderful at, the extraordinary discrepancy between this very long-limbed tall man and the short wife. The fact that only the only normal person in the entire show was ultimately his wife, who was Polly Sherman, makes it for me still perhaps the most remarkable a 12-part series of comedy.

And all I wanted to say was if you've never watched it, you should, and if you have, watch it again. It's a sheer delight. It's an absolute wonder. I think for me it is one of those shows that just keeps on repaying itself, both for the brilliance I think of the comedy, but much more than that, for reflecting on what it is that comedy can do.

Let me pose a final set of questions to you this evening: could we do this now? Is it possible that we can actually laugh at ourselves in this particular way? Can we take taboo subjects and explore them? I suspect we can't. And that means to some extent that we've lost that ability. Why can't we? Because we live in a woke culture which essentially is not prepared to be self-reflective. We have to be self-reflective in order to be able to have done Fawlty Towers. To have come to the Torquay Hotel, see this lunatic hotel manager in life and to think to yourself, "I can construct 12 programmes, which are going to say a hell of a lot about my society and the various people who live therein." And actually deal with subjects, whether it be the Germans, whether it be sex, whether it be nationality or whatever the case may be. And dealing with them in a manner which is both hilarious and provocative. And it's a pity we can't sit in a room together, but I'd be very fascinated if there's anyone in the chat line who has a view about whether to a large degree, this kind of show, classic as it was in its time, and for me still, I laugh at every one with the same degree of gusto as when I watched it the first time. Can we do it again? Is it possible in the 21st century to mount comedy of this particular kind?

And with that I'm going to just have a look at the questions, of which I'm sure there will be some.

Q & A and Comments

I agree with you, Jeffrey, that John Cleese is the best.

Q – Maybe we did not take our prejudice as seriously then and if so, I wonder why, at that time?

A – I think it was a different world, and it's not that we didn't take our prejudice seriously, we were able to talk about them. It worries me that to a large degree we aren't able to have these kinds of conversations.

Marilyn says "maybe we see in the characters types of people we've come across in our own lives."

I think that's probably true, although, you know, it's very hard to believe. Obviously John Cleese found Sinclair in Torquay. It's hard to believe that you could get a hotelier of that calibre, but there we are.

Thank you, yes, I did deal with the Germans.

Linda says "I knew both John Cleese and Andrew Sachs independently of each other in the early '80s, they were much older than me. Andrew Sachs was actually originally from Germany. His father was Jewish, he was extremely straitlaced in real life with a lovely wife."

I think there was that wonderful film done a few years ago before he died of all of the great actors in an old-age home. And when they do the Rigoletto opera, he was in that too. Yes, you could see a different kind of character.

"Cleese suffered immense depression and constant therapy, particularly regarding his relation with women, for which he blamed his mother."

True, and he talks about that. He talks about his therapy, he talks about his rage, and he says to a large degree, "there was part of me which was Basil Fawlty."

Thank you very much, Alan. "The one cliché you left out is that the husband male lead is helpless and the wife female is the normal one who solves all the problems."

Yes, that's true in this particular case. I'm not sure whether it was canned after Patricia. I don't know.

Thank you very much, Barbara.

"I find the funny shows on television now leaves me barely smiling. I find John Cleese exaggerated, positively painful now." Margaret.

Well that's your view. I still think it's absolutely genius, but we all have our different views.

Eli says "A Fish Called Wanda is a must-see film." I agree. Palin and Cleese in their parts were absolutely brilliant.

And you're right, there were various plots, different plots at all.

Q - And then James, "do you think Fawlty Towers could be made now? I fear the politically correct executors at today's BBC wouldn't stomach some of the content, such as the Major's comments about women and foreigners. Sadly, some people who criticise this wonderful comedy, that it's the Major's prejudice and Basil's that are being sexualized."

A - Well that's precisely what I was trying to aim at, James. And in a sense that was partly what I wanted to have as a conversation. So that whilst in fact I wanted to show you a series of clips from Fawlty Towers and I understand somebody who doesn't think they're funny anymore, I think they are. And I think that the interesting part about it is that we are laughing at prejudices, the brilliance of it is to focus in on all these themes that I've spoken about and ultimately to actually satirise them. It's not prejudicial itself, it's to actually expose forms of prejudice for which the whole thing is targeted, and for me that was absolutely brilliant and I thought that is why it remains unique. So yes, perhaps you could argue that it's slightly stylized, but frankly I fail to see that. I still think that to a large degree, it punctures the pomposity of the English balloon in a way that I find totally delightful, and I have to say after watching cricket, at Lord's, which is a place where really quite extraordinarily few South Africans, all I can say is bravo to Cleese.

He was a perfectionist lot and there were for many times and he says so.

Thank you Mary. Larry David and his "Curb Your Enthusiasm" anyway.

Yes, Larry David did. And the interesting thing is, when I refer to Larry David about the question of "hugging and learning," there is in some of Larry David's writing references to this. Because you see all of these in a sense, we could go back and we could have a real conversation about where this all starts, whether we start with people like Chaplain or the Marks brothers, et cetera, and we develop our way through. But all of these seem to me precisely building one on the other.

I'm sorry there weren't more clips. Perhaps we could do another one with some more of them. They are really very funny.

"If we can laugh at Fawlty Towers today and the so-called prejudice, then we can produce the same kind of humanitarian."

Rod, I would hope so. I just don't think we can, because I think, I

mean I'd be very scared, if I was John Cleese to do that.

Yes, there is a lot of humour still around British society. British humour has always been wonderful. But I do think that it's got to be clear, it's got to be carefully constructed in a particular way, and that to quite a considerable extent, not just in Britain but all over the world, including this country. Let me be quite blunt where I live, which is in South Africa. Certain jokes you just can't tell. I mean, let me be quite frank, there was a time when I lectured when to a large degree, I could tell a whole series of jokes to my class and they would laugh and think they were funny. I don't do that anymore. It's just not worth the risk. And I think that's the issue I wanted to debate with you.

Jonathan says "you know, public opinion is not tolerant in EU even though it is humorous and it's unfortunate that brilliance is lost."

I agree Barbara, it is the question of political correctness.

Thank you for all of your comments. And I think that is the great tragedy of it all.

But I leave you with this thought – that when we look at Fawlty Towers, as I say, the first episode was what, 20, 25, 21, 22, 47 years ago. Very different British society, I accept. Far less cosmopolitan than it is now, and it's not just about British society, whereas all society. The prejudice we have about foreigners who don't speak proper English. The fact that to a large degree they're still within many forms of society, forms of sexual taboos, although frankly those have broken down. Although that's played up very much in this particular idea. The idea of actually trying to be part of the upper class. There are wonderful episodes of Fawlty Towers where he's so impressed by the lord who comes to stay and the more upper class people that he wants as guests, and yet he hates them, but on the other hand he needs them. And that sort of strange symbiotic relationship is part of it.

So I think that Fawlty Towers, for me, when Trudy asked me to do it was only a pleasure because I thought we'd have a damn good laugh. But at the same time, we perhaps would reflect on what kind of humour we can still have in the 21st century and why.

Thank you so much for watching.