

Theater

‘One of the best experiences of my life’

Eric Idle talks about the enduring appeal of ‘Spamalot,’ 21 years later

By Marc Hirsh
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

There are quite a few accomplishments that Eric Idle can hang his hat on. There was the whole Monty Python thing, of course, a towering achievement even if he’d vanished entirely afterward. His Beatles parody “The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash” pioneered the mockumentary format six years before “This Is Spinal Tap.” A 2014 survey named his sing- and whistle-along “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” the most popular funeral song in Britain. But the thing he’s proudest of at the moment is when the president of the United States attacked him on television less than a week ago.

“I was on ‘Morning Joe,’ and [Joe Scarborough] revealed he was a tremendous Rutles fan. At the end of which the president rang up and complained that we’re not funny at all,” says Idle over the phone on the way to Saratoga Springs on a book tour for his New York Times best-selling memoir, “Idle in Provence.” “And [Scarborough]’s holding my book up at the end. I’ve gone off by then. He’s shaking my book around, going, ‘You’re saying Eric Idle is not funny?’ And that’s the highest compliment, isn’t it? Someone with no sense of humor saying you’re not funny.”

As if in rebuke of such an assessment, here comes “Spamalot,” the Tony-winning musical that takes the bones of “Monty Python and the Holy Grail,” tosses them in a blender with other bits of Python business and slathers it with winking Broadway and Vegas glitz. Following the recent Broadway revival, the touring production lands at the Boch Center Wang Theatre on Thursday. “I love the fact that it still works after all that time,” Idle says.

Q. “Spamalot” first opened in Chicago 21 years ago, 30 years after “Monty Python and the Holy Grail” premiered. Which, for the sake of this question, I’m

going to pretend is the exact same length of time. How is it looking back on “Spamalot” almost as long as Spamalot was looking back on Holy Grail?

A. Well, I mean, it was a great surprise to open again on Broadway. It was one of the best experiences of my life. I got to work with Mike Nichols and all these amazing people, like the lovely Tim Curry, who just left us, and Hank Azaria and David Hyde Pierce. It was a great time. You don’t know you’re making a thing that’s going to be a big hit. You’re trying to make a show work on stage. And that’s not easy from a film that has no plot, virtually. [laughs] A series of random events and 98 characters.

Q. And no ending.
A. And a terrible ending, yes. Mike always wanted to do “Bright Side” as an encore, but we actually put it in Act Two because it lifted up Act Two.

Q. You mentioned Tim Curry, who was your second original King Arthur.
A. Our first original King Arthur.

Q. I was counting Graham Chapman [who played Arthur in the movie].
A. I don’t think of the film because the film is a whole different thing. Act Two of the play is completely different. I mean, a story breaks out, a love story. The Lady of the Lake is a character. There was a process of discovery of how to turn it into a play. And that was not a given. I mean, yes, there’s some wonderfully funny stuff in the film, but it’s kind of a bit random and sort of goes all over the place.

Q. Your original stage King Arthur Tim Curry just recently died. Is that at the forefront of anybody’s mind?

A. On this book tour I was in the UK and in New York, so I’m being interviewed a lot. We do conversations for two hours or something, and I often play a song, a favorite of mine that wasn’t in [the show], where Tim is sing-



MATTHEW MURPHY



LYNN BISHOP/NBC VIA GETTY IMAGES

ing. It’s called “Life Will Get You in the End.” And it’s very sweet. So I play that as a tribute for him because I liked him. I knew him for a very long time before, from England. I first saw him onstage in “Rocky Horror” in the King’s Road cinema. So I’ve known him an awful long time, and he was always very friendly and kind. He was a remarkable person.

Q. Watching clips online of Sara Ramirez and Hannah Waddingham as the Lady of the Lake, I realized that you can’t just put a great singer in that role. You need somebody who can do things with her voice. In “Find Your Grail,” Ramirez is shifting through four or five different singing styles in the course of one song. And Waddingham does the same thing. How does that complicate

“I love the fact that it still works after all that time,” says Eric Idle (left) of “Spamalot.” Above: Members of the “Spamalot” cast.

MONTY PYTHON’S SPAMALOT
Book by Eric Idle. Music and lyrics by John Du Prez and Eric Idle. Directed by Josh Rhodes. Boch Center Wang Theatre, 270 Tremont St. Oct. 8-11. Tickets \$35-\$164.40, 617-482-9393 or bochcenter.org/events/detail/spamalot

finding someone who can do that role?

A. Well, I mean, [Ramirez] created the role. There wasn’t a role. The Lady of the Lake is just referred to in the film. But I realized very early on that two things have to happen if you’re adapting a Python thing: a) you have to put women in, and b) you have to have a major lead mezzo or a major singer. So we wrote the diva character, and we tried many, many different songs during the rehearsal period, and she found her style and found what to do. But what it means is you’ve got to have a comedienne who can sing.

Q. I had a colleague who was in England in the late ’90s visiting universities when [the late Python member] Terry Jones was delivering an academic talk on history, and she went in thinking that it would be fun. And she told us later that it was the driest, dullest, most interminable thing she’d ever experi-

enced, which to me feels honestly like the funniest thing he possibly could have done.

A. Well, actually, Terry was very serious about it. I think he reinterpreted “Chaucer’s Knight,” and I don’t happen to believe he’s right. I think it wasn’t satire. But he also made a brilliant series on the Crusades. I thought he did the best documentaries. Terry was quite serious about the history thing, and he studied it. I remember he went and looked at the Chaucer manuscript in the Huntington Museum in LA because he had this theory. But Terry often had very wild theories, [laughs] which were more interesting but not necessarily true. But he was rarely unfunny. Where was he, at a university?

Q. It was at a university. I think that she thought that it was going to be a historical lecture but with a little bit of a Monty Python sparkle. She said that he was just delivering it like he was an academic professor.

A. He never finished his degree, and I think he was always trying to prove to himself that he could have been a historian as well. [laughs] He was probably at Oxford, right?

Q. It may have been at Oxford.
A. Yeah, he wouldn’t have got away with that at Cambridge. You had to be funny as well.

Interview was edited and condensed. Marc Hirsh can be reached at officialmarc@gmail.com or on Bluesky @spacecitymarc.bsky.social

By Christopher Wallenberg
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Aaron Sorkin may be one of Hollywood’s most celebrated screenwriters, with five Emmys to his name for “The West Wing” and an Oscar on his shelf for writing the seminal “The Social Network.” But the prospect of adapting Harper Lee’s landmark novel “To Kill a Mockingbird” for the stage felt like “a suicide mission” in which he would become the villain, he told the Globe in a 2022 Globe interview. He said he feared wrecking people’s adoring memories of a beloved American literary classic and the enduring 1962 film starring Gregory Peck. But he didn’t want the play to be an “exercise in nostalgia” or “a trip to the museum.” It needed to stand on its own, resonate for contemporary audiences, and be told with verve and immediacy. “You have to fall out of love with the source material and get rid of the bubble wrap,” he said at the time.

The resulting stage version, starring Jeff Daniels, opened on Broadway to critical acclaim in 2018 and became a huge box office hit. The national tour came to Boston in 2022. Now, the Huntington and artistic director Loretta Greco are mounting the first regional production of Sorkin’s “Mockingbird” at the Huntington Theatre, Oct. 8–Nov. 8. Here’s what to look out for in this adaptation of the novel, about a young girl in a small Alabama town watching her father, an attorney, grapple with racism, bigotry, and injustice as he defends a Black man accused of rape in the Jim Crow South in the 1930s.

Scout tells the story, but Atticus is the protagonist

In the novel, Scout (Karen Killeen) is the protagonist and serves as Atticus’s moral compass. But she loses some of her innocence and has her eyes opened over the course of the story. For the stage adaptation, Scout, her older brother Jem, and their friend Dill are the storytellers, but Sorkin made Atticus (Karl Kenzler) the protagonist, which meant he couldn’t be a sanctified hero only seen through the eyes of his daughter, as in the novel.

Atticus is more morally complex

Sorkin wanted Atticus to go on a journey, to have an awakening, and to change. In the novel, he’s viewed as a hero and paragon of moral virtue who



SARA KRULWICH/NEW YORK TIMES/FILE

Jeff Daniels and Celia Keenan-Bolger in “To Kill a Mockingbird” at the Shubert Theater in New York in 2018.

What to expect from Aaron Sorkin’s ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’

stands up for justice. But Sorkin realized that Atticus is a flawed man, prone to forgiving unforgivable sins from some of the most virulently racist people in the town in the name of finding goodness in everyone.

“[Sorkin] has taken Atticus off of his white savior platform. He created a story where the protagonist has this very long trajectory of getting his dignity, his confidence, his absolute beliefs and bedrock foundations dented, dinged, and questioned,” says Greco, who’s directing the Huntington production, in a recent interview. “You see a little of Atticus’s hubris too. He feels much more like a man and not a saint.”

Calpurnia and Tom Robinson have deeper roles

That brings us to the only two significant Black characters in the story —

Calpurnia (Patrice Jean-Baptiste), the Finch family’s maid and nanny, who has helped to raise the kids since the death of their mother, and Tom Robinson (Rafael Jordan), who’s been unjustly charged with rape in the trial that drives the book’s plot.

Sorkin’s adaptation gives both of those characters strong voices, new dimensions, and real moments of agency. The deepening of those characters serves as a great opportunity for conflict, since it allowed Sorkin to dramatize the friction between Atticus and Calpurnia, whose relationship Scout likens to that of a brother and sister.

A frustrated Calpurnia criticizes Atticus for tolerating the intolerant and for turning a blind eye to the ugly truths about the town. She sardonically repeats his own words back to him: “You gotta give Maycomb time, Cal. This is

the deep South, you gotta give ’em time,” she says. “How much time would Maycomb like? [Tom’s wife] Helen Robinson was askin’.”

“I love that both Tom and Cal, in their very different ways, call Atticus on his [expletive] and live their own truths,” Greco says.

Characters speak fluent Sorkinese

Sorkin’s patented rapid-fire conversational exchanges and hyper-verbal sparring is on display at times, including in some of the debates between characters and in the courtroom scenes. And his penchant for propulsive storytelling speeds up the leisurely pace of the novel. “His language is absolutely delicious. It is like music,” Greco says. “We are toggling from kids to adults, from the courtroom back to the kids, from in the present moment to into the past. There

are very few people that can do that as lyrically and as muscularly as Sorkin.”

Courtroom drama takes center stage

As the writer of “A Few Good Men,” “The Trial of the Chicago 7,” and even “The Social Network,” Sorkin is a master of crafting tense courtroom and legal dramas, and those skills come to the forefront in his adaptation. While Tom Robinson’s trial doesn’t occur until the midway point of the novel, Sorkin threads the courtroom scenes throughout the story to build high-wire tension from the beginning.

The staging at the Huntington, Greco says, will immerse the audience inside Maycomb and the courtroom, so the audience will feel the conflicts on a visceral level. The production design eschews naturalism in favor of a simple set, with some tables, chairs, and a few set pieces that move on and off. “The fourth wall between the artists and the audience will be super porous,” Greco says. “So there are steps that lead from the audience into this liminal space outside of the box, and then the playing space is a white box.”

Adult actors play the children

In this stage adaptation, 8-year-old Scout, her older brother Jem (age 12), and their loquacious friend Dill (age 11) are all portrayed by adult actors — Killeen, Benjamin Izaak, and Andrew Stevens Purdy. The story unfolds in the form of a memory play told from the point-of-view of the children, but narrated by them as grown-ups speaking directly to the audience. And that’s due in part to all that Sorkinese dialogue: “Children would not be able to handle this much language in a play,” the writer told the Globe in 2022. The adult actors who have worked on his version modulate their posture and voices to help differentiate between their moments as adults looking back, and their scenes as the kids.

Along the way, the children lose some of their innocence, and the scales fall from their eyes. “When we’re kids, everything is supposed to be fair. We think the world is black and white,” Greco says. “And growing up is realizing that the world and humanity is nuanced. It is mostly in the gray zone. But if we don’t believe in justice, if we don’t aspire to the higher goodness in us all, we’ll be nowhere. Scout comes to see that justice is fragile and not as clear cut as Atticus made it out to be.”