

TV Sunday

And now for
something
completely
different ...

THE NEXT MONTY PYTHON



Up your nose: The "brilliant and disgusting" *League of Gentlemen* are (l-r) Mark Gatiss, Steve Pemberton, Jeremy Dyson. There's a fourth gent — Reece Shearsmith — but he's off practicing to be a stalker.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Brace yourselves for "The League of Gentlemen." An incestuous cross between "Twin Peaks" and "Monty Python," this BBC comedy is already a bonafide sensation in the U.K.

It debuts on Comedy Central June 19 and U.S. audiences have a lot of catching up to do.

Twelve episodes have aired in the U.K., snagging a BAFTA (the British Emmy) for Best Comedy and critical acclaim of an uneasy sort.

One British paper said "The League of Gentlemen" is "consistently brilliant, intermittently nightmarish, often disgusting . . . and certainly not in any conventional

The *League of Gentlemen* is on its way to American TV after taking Britain by storm. Forget the Minister of Silly Walks — here comes Her Lipp, a German tour guide with a fondness for young boys. Of course, the *Gentlemen* don women's clothing at every opportunity — they are British, after all.

sense a comedy." Most other critics settle for "disturbing" and/or "hilarious."

The four-member troupe is about to launch a 40-date summer tour in the U.K., there's a Christmas special set for filming in August, and a clever scrapbook will be on sale by the end of the year.

"The book is bound in human skin," insists cam-

erashy *Gentleman* Jeremy Dyson, who only appears onscreen in brief cameos. "Hopefully, with a belly button or a nipple on the back. We're just haggling about that at the moment."

He and fellow *Gentlemen* Steve Pemberton and Mark Gatiss are gathered in the London office of their management compa-

ny to discuss the show. The fourth member — Reece Shearsmith — is spending his holiday as a stalker.

According to the others, he's in Florence for the sole purpose of trying to glimpse Anthony Hopkins filming "Hannibal." Most other oddball shows get weird fans as stalkers.



John Cleese was the Minister of Silly Walks.

Only the *League of Gentlemen* spends its spare time stalking others.

They're all wondering if such a distinctively British series can travel. Since the show is already airing or set to air in France, Finland, Italy, Australia

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Catch-phrases to watch for on The League of Gentlemen

- This is a local shop for local people!
- Okey-dokey, pig in a pokey!
- There's nothing for you here.
- What's all this shouting? We'll have no trouble here.
- Are you local?

and Canada (among other countries), the answer is clearly yes.

"The League of Gentlemen" is a soap opera of sorts, a Gothic comedy set in the fictional northern town of Royston Vasey. (The sign leading into town reads ominously "Royston Vasey — You'll Never Leave!")

This hamlet has more than its fair share of sadists, swingers, toad-worshippers, xenophobes and nudists.

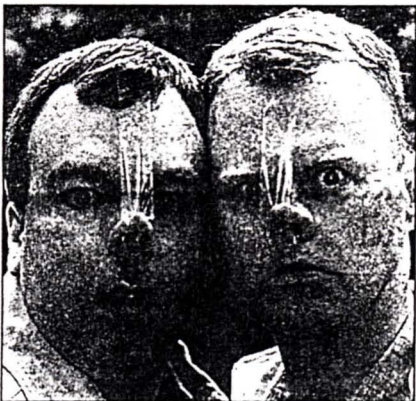
Among the many notables are Edward and Tubbs, porcine shopowners who live in fear of bothersome customers; Hilary Briss, the local butcher who adds an addictive "special" ingredient to his meat; Herr Lipp, a German tour guide with a fondness for the local lads; and Mr Chinnery, a particularly bad veterinarian.

Perhaps best of all is Pauline, the tyrannical head of the local unemployment office. "People are like pens," says Pauline. "If they don't work, you shake them. If they still don't work, you throw them away."

The show's particular genius is to combine throw-away sketch comedy bits (posters for "The Shud Monty" and the like) with continuing storylines about the perverse, frustrated lives of its recurring characters.

Defiantly weird — the show's second season began with a truly bizarre plot featuring a macabre circus performer named Papa Lazarou — "The League of Gentlemen" may seem even more surreal to American viewers.

The Comedy Central episodes are 22 minutes, down from half an hour," explains Gentleman Steve Pemberton. "They've cut out eight minutes from each



Three little pigs: Next from the oddball team of Brit comedians is a scrapbook — "bound in human skin."

episode and made an extra show or two out of the bits and pieces. So it makes it even weirder than it was, if that's possible.

"Some episodes are actually stronger because they focus in on just one or two stories," he says.

The story of how the troupe began is much more straightforward.

Three of them were study-

ing theater in Wakefield, while Dyson studied philosophy at Leeds University. Though they'd never worked together, their first stage appearance was as part of a roundup of the "best of the year." (One act couldn't be reunited, so they filled in.)

They later scored top prize at the prestigious Edinburgh Comedy

Festival in 1997, which led to a bumpy but successful transition from live act to radio show.

"Radio presents all sorts of problems," says rather-tall Gentleman Mark Gatiss. "You end up having to say, 'I am holding this jade sword in my hand whilst wearing a red hat.'" The BBC soon caught on to their cult following and offered the group a TV series.

"It's a classic route to success," says Pemberton, "going back 40 or 50 years. Spike Milligan, The Goon Show [with Peter Sellers], they all followed the same path."

They didn't all end up with characters as strange as Harvey and Val, a seemingly normal couple who have very stringent rules for houseguests, including color-coded towels for the drying of various body parts and a downstairs toilet that must never be used for passing "solids."

But they all ended up quitting their day jobs and the League of Gentlemen followed. Pemberton isn't working anymore for the London office of *Variety*; Dyson is doing a reading at a bookshop in Leeds rather than working behind the counter and Gatiss is still writing the occasional "Doctor Who" novel — but only when he wants to.

Now the performers (all in their early 30s) are trying to find the balance for success. After just 12 episodes (less than half a season for the typical U.S. sitcom), some critics are urging them to quit while they're ahead.

"There is the 'Fawlty Towers' principle everyone has in the back of their minds," admits Dyson, alluding to the John Cleese series that produced just a handful of episodes over many years and then called it a day.

Before that day comes, the League of Gentlemen hope to hit the big screen, albeit with as small a budget as possible. "I think Monty Python's best film is *The Holy Grail*," says Gatiss, "because that's the one where they've got no money."

Their fondest dream however is even more perverse: "What we really want is for someone in the States to buy the rights and remake it," says Gatiss. "We wouldn't want anyone else to ever see it, of course. Just us."

Pemberton spontaneously delivers the show's biggest catch phrase in a hilarious Southern twang: "This is a local shop for local people!"

They all laugh and suddenly a Deep South sister city to Royston Vasey seems very real indeed.