

**YING TONG SCHOOLS DAY PERFORMANCE**  
**IMPORTANT INFORMATION**

<b>Date</b>	Wednesday 9 May 2007
<b>Venue</b>	Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House
<b>Pre-performance forum</b>	10.30 am
<b>Lunch Break</b>	11.15 am
<b>Performance Commences</b>	12.15 pm
<b>Performance Concludes</b>	2.20pm
<b>Post performance Q+A concludes</b>	2.35pm

We respectfully ask that you discuss theatre etiquette with your students prior to coming to the performance.

**Running Late?**

Please contact Sydney Theatre Company's main switch on 9250 1700 and a message will be passed to Front of House.

**Booking Queries**

Please contact Barbara Vickery on 02 9250 1778 or [bvickery@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:bvickery@sydneytheatre.com.au)

**General Education Queries**

Please contact Helen Hristofski, Education Manager, on 02 9250 1726 or [hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au)

Sydney Theatre Company and Goldman Sachs JBWere present



# Ying Tong

A Walk with *The Goons*  
by Roy Smiles

## Teacher's Resource Kit

Written and compiled by Elizabeth Surbey

### Acknowledgements

Sydney Theatre Company would like to thank the following for their invaluable material for these Teachers' Notes: Helen Hristofski and Laura Scrivano of the Sydney Theatre Company

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# Sydney Theatre Company

Sydney Theatre Company (STC) produces theatre of the highest standard that consistently illuminates, entertains and challenges. It is committed to the engagement between the imagination of its artists and its audiences, to the development of the art form of theatre, and to excellence in all its endeavours.

STC has been a major force in Australian drama since its establishment in 1978. It was created by the New South Wales Government, following the demise of the Old Tote Theatre Company. The original intention was to better utilise the Drama Theatre of the Sydney Opera House and the new Company comprised a small central administration staff, technical staff, workshop and rehearsal facilities. Richard Wherrett was appointed Artistic Director from 1979 to 1990.

The Wharf opened on 13 December, 1984 by Premier Neville Wran, which allowed all departments of the Company to be housed under one roof for the first time. The venue was to become the envy of the theatre world. From 1985, the Company could perform in two locations throughout the year, the Drama Theatre and The Wharf. From 1990 to 1999, Wayne Harrison served as Artistic Director. A third regular venue, Sydney Theatre, administered and operated by STC, opened in 2004.

The predominant financial commitment to STC is made by its audience. Of this audience, the Company's subscribers make a crucial commitment. The Company is also assisted annually by grants from the Federal Government through the Australia Council and the New South Wales Government through the Ministry for the Arts. STC also actively seeks sponsorship and donations from the corporate sector and from private individuals.

Under the leadership Artistic Director Robyn Nevin, STC's annual subscription season features up to 12 plays including: recent or new Australian works, interpretations of theatrical classics and contemporary foreign works. In addition STC regularly co-produces and tours productions throughout Australia, playing annually to audiences in excess of 300,000. STC actively fosters relationships and collaborations with international artists and companies. In 2006 STC began a new journey of artistic development with the inception of The Actors Company, the STC ensemble.

**To access detailed information on Sydney Theatre Company, its history and productions please contact our Archivist Judith Seeff at [jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:jseeff@sydneytheatre.com.au)**

# Sydney Theatre Company Education

Sydney Theatre Company is committed to education by programming original productions and workshops that enthuse and engage the next generation of theatre-goers. Within the education programme Sydney Theatre Company produces its own season of plays as well as collaborates with leading theatre-for-young-people companies across Australia.

Often a young person's first experience of theatre is facilitated by teachers. STC ensures access to all of its mainstage productions through the schoolday programme as well as produces and tours theatre specifically crafted to resonate with young people.

STC works to support educators in their Drama and English-teaching practices. Every year dynamic workshops are held by leading theatre practitioners to support curriculum content, detailed resources are provided for all productions and an extensive work-experience programme is available to students from across the state.

The annual Sydney Morning Herald and Sydney Theatre Company Young Playwright's Award continues to develop and encourage young writers. The winning students receive a cash prize and a two-day workshop with a professional director, dramaturg and cast – an invaluable opportunity and experience.

Sydney Theatre Company has an extensive on-line resource for teachers and students. Visit [www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education\\_](http://www.sydneytheatre.com.au/education_). We encourage teachers to subscribe to regular e-news to keep informed as well as access heavily discounted tickets and special offers.

**For further information on STC Education programme, please contact the Education Manager Helen Hristofski at [hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au](mailto:hristofski@sydneytheatre.com.au)**

# Production Credits

## Cast

Jonathon Biggins	-	Peter Sellers
Geoff Kelso	-	Spike Milligan
David James	-	Harry Secombe
Tony Harvey	-	Wallace Greenslade (announcer)

Director	-	Richard Cottrell
Set and Costume Designer	-	Michael Scott-Mitchell
Lighting Designer	-	Damien Cooper
Sound Effects Designer	-	Paul Charlier
Sound Designer	-	Jeremy Silver

Assistant Director	-	John Sheedy
Singing Coach	-	Jeremy Silver
Fight Consultant	-	Lyle Rowling
Production Manager	-	Janet Eades
Stage Manager	-	John Reid
Deputy Stage Manager	-	Kate Smith
Assistant Stage Manager (on tour)	-	Emma Beaurepaire
Hair, Wig & Make-up Supervisor	-	Lauren A. Proietti
Production Photographer	-	Heidrun Lohr

This production opened on the 14 April at the Sydney Opera House Drama Theatre.

# Summary

'Agonisingly funny... Ying Tong proves both hilarious and deeply moving and in the theatre you can't ask for much more than that.'

*Telegraph UK*

'The show has an invigorating spirit of insanity. I recommend it with relish.'

*Sunday Times UK*

A Goon Show is underway but Spike Milligan (Geoff Kelso) has been institutionalised. The problem is Spike can't write any more.

Undeterred, he writes anyway, under his hospital bed sheets, typing incessantly. But no civilised member of society can write like this: Catholic and Jewish leprechauns keep interrupting. And why do they look awfully like his fellow Goons Peter Sellers (Jonathan Biggins) and Harry Secombe (David James)?

Spike's marbles have been stolen by Moriarty and Grytpype-Thynne. Eccles, Bluebottle and Neddie launch an offensive inside Spike's head to recover them. Can Spike find his own marbles? Indeed will Spike ever write another Goon Show? Will he write again? Or will he be consumed by his own creations?

Welcome to the mad world of Ying Tong.

If you are already humming the song, you are probably half-way there. Roy Smiles' play took the UK by storm last year. Inspired by the much-loved style and sounds of *The Goon Show*, Smiles has crafted a work of joy, sadness and ingenuity.

**From the STC press release**

Roy Smiles has elected to develop an amazingly creative piece that not only reflects the actual goon shows themselves but whirls the audience into the actual world of *The Goons* and the truths behind the trio, their straight man Greenslade and mix it all up with facts inside the fiction. It is an intimate picture of Spike Milligan's malaise and a very human condition – especially noted amongst those of any genius – depression. The play is filled with the style of humour that was '*The Goon Show*' and loved by millions. First across a decade and then on into years of comic influence.

# Roy Smiles

Roy Smiles is from West London. His many plays include: *Top of the Town*, *Danny Boy*, *The Promised Land*, *Stand Up*, *Roberto Calvi Is Alive & Well*, *The Little Green Monkey Club*, *Lunatics' Tango*, *Bombing People* and his 'Dead Comedian's Trilogy': *Ying Tong (The Goons)*, *The Lad Himself (Tony Hancock)* and *Schmucks* (Groucho Marx/Lenny Bruce). *Ying Tong* got to London's West End – The New Ambassadors Theatre – and has also been performed in New Zealand and South Africa. The English producer of *Ying Tong* – Michael Codron – is producing his latest play *Year of the Rat* (about George Orwell's attempts to write *Nineteen Eighty Four*) in the West End later this year.

***"Spike was the godfather of alternative comedy. The Pythons... got totally influenced and I watched Python and I was totally influenced."*** Eddie Izzard

## Author's Note

I grew up in the England of the 1970s: a grey and mean land where it always rained. All skinhead gob, inflation, the three day week and losing the Cod War to Iceland. The latter being one of my country's more embarrassing moments but in our defence they threw herring and we only had bullets: the dirty rotten swines! Our navy never had a chance I tell you!

I was living at that time in West London with my brother, sister and widowed father. A Geordie of few words and those few words were: 'shut up'. But though we were poor – we were miserable. There were several gleams of comedic light midst the sobbing and the head-butting however: the God-like Dave Allen Show on BBC 1 on Tuesdays and the repeats of *The Goon Show* on Sundays on Radio 2.

Throughout the 70s my brother and I were transfixed by listening to *The Goon Show*. It was supposed to be an 'old' show but was light years ahead of just about anything else at the time – save Dave Allen. The reactionary humour of *The Comedians* and *Love Thy Neighbour* and the sitcom tedium of *Terry & June* could just not compare to a revolutionary show that came from that most conservative of decades: the 1950s.

It was surreal humour from another planet and blew away anything I've heard before or since. It wasn't just Spike Milligan's scripts which were brilliant of course. Peter Sellers remains, for me, the finest comic actor of my lifetime. Not only was every voice sheer perfection but he inhabited every role as if it were him. Harry Secombe's role has always been vastly underrated. But listen to any average *Goon Show*, listen to the way he drives every episode, not only with his natural verve but with his delivery: the speed and diction of which are unsurpassable.

The reaction to *Ying Tong* in Leeds (where the show began), London's West End, South Africa and New Zealand has stunned me frankly; and the support and enthusiasm of the Milligan and Secombe families has been deeply touching.

If anything the play is a tribute to Spike Milligan and his genius. I adore the Monty Python team but Monty Python's Flying Circus took six guys, all from university, to write. Milligan was working class, uneducated and – at the time he first started writing *The Goon Show* – unemployed and he did it (mostly) alone. Writing the show for nine long years and at that high a level drove him alas to the edge of madness; but my world would be a lesser place without *The Goon Show* and certainly a greyer one.

So God bless you Milligan! Wherever you may be! And last one to the NAAFI is a big girl's blouse!



# Context of the Play & Historical reference points

*The Goon Show* was a popular and influential British radio comedy programme, originally produced and broadcast by the BBC from 1951 to 1960 on the BBC Home Service.

The scripts mixed ludicrous plots with surreal humour, puns, catchphrases and an array of silly and bizarre sound effects. Many elements of the show satirised contemporary life in Britain, parodying aspects of show business, commerce, industry, art, politics, diplomacy, the police, the military, education, class structure, literature and film.

The show was enormously popular in Britain in its heyday; tickets for the recording sessions at the BBC's Aeolian Hall studio in London were constantly over-subscribed and the various character voices and catchphrases from the show quickly became part of the vernacular. The series has remained consistently popular ever since – it is still being broadcast once a week by the ABC in Australia, as well as on BBC 7; and it has exerted a singular influence over succeeding generations of comedians and writers, most notably the creators of Monty Python's Flying Circus and the Beatles' movies.

Milligan and Harry Secombe became friends while serving in the Royal Artillery during World War II; they met up with Peter Sellers and Michael Bentine back in England after the war and got together in Grafton's pub performing and experimenting with tape recorders. Famously, Milligan first encountered Secombe after Gunner Milligan's artillery unit accidentally allowed a large howitzer to roll off a cliff - under which Secombe was sitting in a small wireless truck : "Suddenly there was a terrible noise as some monstrous object fell from the sky quite close to us. There was considerable confusion, and in the middle of it all the flap of the truck was pushed open and a young, helmeted idiot asked 'Anybody see a gun?' It was Milligan..."

The strain of writing and performing took a heavy toll on Milligan, who was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He suffered a nervous breakdown during the run of the show, requiring hospitalisation, and the intense pressure also contributed to the failure of his marriage. Milligan was absent from the show for twelve episodes in the third series after an attempt to murder Peter Sellers with a knife. The story was that he left his house and made for the Sellers household, but Milligan's wife managed to telephone Sellers before Milligan arrived at the door.

*The Goon Show* paved the way for surreal and alternative humour. Many of the sequences have been cited as being visionary in the way that they challenged the traditional conventions of comedy. Perhaps one of the most famous is from *The Mysterious Punch-Up-The-Conker*, where Bluebottle (Sellers) asks Eccles (Milligan) what the time is. Eccles consults a piece of paper, on which is written "Eight o'clock" – the answer he received the last time he asked somebody what the time was. The implications of this method of telling the time are then explored at some length:

**Bluebottle:** What time is it Eccles?

**Eccles:** Err, just a minute. I've got it written down here on a piece of paper. A nice man wrote the time down for me this morning.

**Bluebottle:** Then why do you carry it around with you, Eccles?

**Eccles:** Well, if anybody asks me the time, I can show it to them.

**Bluebottle:** Wait a minute Eccles, my good man...

**Eccles:** What is it fellow?

**Bluebottle:** It's writted on this bit of paper, what is eight o'clock, is writted.

**Eccles:** I know that my good fellow. That's right. When I asked the fella to write it down, it was eight o'clock.

**Bluebottle:** Well then, supposing when somebody asks you the time, it isn't eight o'clock?

**Eccles:** Then I don't show it to them.

**Bluebottle:** Well how do you know when it's eight o'clock?

**Eccles:** I've got it written down on a piece of paper!

This idea appeared frequently in similar guises: pictures and audio recordings of money were accepted as legal tender, the word "dinner" written on a piece of paper and eaten served as a full meal, and so on.

## A History of *The Goons*

*The Goons* met in the 1940s before going on to create the most influential comedy show of their era. Like many of the post war entertainers, they all began performing whilst serving in the forces. Here is a brief history of the show and its cast. (further supplemented from the STC program notes)

### A Goonology

- 1918 Spike Milligan born in India. His father was an Irishman serving in the British Army.
- 1921 Harry Secombe born in Swansea, England.
- 1925 Peter Sellers born in Southsea, Hampshire into a family of entertainers.
- 1934 Spike and his family return to England where he works as a factory hand as well as playing the trumpet for jazz bands.
- 1939 World War Two breaks out. Spike is 21 and is conscripted to serve in the Royal Artillery. Harry Secombe is 18 and sent to serve in North Africa. Peter Sellers, only 14 at the time, is not conscripted.
- 1942 Spike and Harry meet in North Africa while on duty in the Western Desert. They perform in many troop concerts.
- 1943 Peter Sellers is sent to serve in the Royal Air Force but, because of poor eyesight, he is relegated to ground staff duties. To pass the time he becomes a member of the RAF Entertainment Unit and tours with Ralph Reader's Gang Shows.
- 1944 Spike is wounded in action in Italy and hospitalised for shellshock.

- 1945 After drifting through various military jobs in Italy, Spike eventually becomes a full-time entertainer playing with The Bill Hall Trio in jazz/comedy concert parties for the troops.
- WAR ends. Score 2-0 to the allies. The atomic bomb stops play.
- 1948 Spike, Harry and Peter are all back in England. Spike is making an unsteady income playing with the Hall trio whilst trying to break into radio. Harry gets a job working as an impersonator at the Windmill Theatre. He meets Peter Sellers and Michael Bentine. Spike, Harry and Michael Bentine meet at Jimmy Grafton's pub, writing skits, jokes and doing impressions. Peter Sellers soon joins the team. (Jimmy Grafton, the Landlord of the pub (and scriptwriter) is instrumental in getting *The Goons* started at the BBC. He will also edit the early series of the show.)
- 1948 Harry Secombe marries Myra Atherton.
- 1950 The BBC are approached by Spike, Harry, Peter and Michael with their ideas for a new radio show.
- 1951 Peter Sellers marries actress Anne Howe.
- 1951 A pilot episode of *The Goon Show* was made in February and the first series was broadcast on BBC in May. The first series was entitled *Crazy People* as the BBC did not like the name *The Goon Show*. Many of the characters later to become popular pop up in the early shows. By the end of the year the show gets its intended title, *The Goon Show*.
- 1952 Spike marries June Marlowe.
- 1952 At the end of the second season Michael Bentine leaves the show. The characters become more regular and the comedy and sound effects more refined.
- 1952 Spike suffers his first breakdown. He tries to kill Peter Sellers with a potato peeler.
- 1953 The original Goon Show announcer Andrew Timothy leaves and is replaced by Wallace Greenslade. Spike misses twelve episodes due to mental illness. In the fourth series the show begins to have a single plot giving the show its most recognisable format.
- 1954 The BBC transcription service starts to record shows, making them available to audiences in other countries. *The Goons* do their Morris Dancers routine at the Coventry Hippodrome.
- 1954-1959 *The Goon Show* becomes hugely successful and all three performers are household names in the UK and Australia.
- 1959 June Marlowe leaves Spike and takes their three children with them. Spike is in Australia at the time visiting his parents who moved to Woy Woy in retirement.
- 1959 Spike announces that the 9th series will be the last. However, *The Goons* are presented with a petition signed by listeners to carry on the show.

- 1960 28 January. The last Goon Show is broadcast after the BBC pull the plug due to Spike's inability to sign another contract.
- 1961 Wallace Greenslade dies.
- 1961 onwards  
*The Goons* embark on successful solo careers. Harry continues to be popular as a singer and entertainer. Peter becomes an international film star appearing in films such as *Dr Strangelove*, *The Pink Panther* and *Being There*. Spike performs onstage and becomes a prolific writer of books, plays, poetry and TV comedy.
- 1972 *The Goons* reunite to do a special called *The Last Goon Show of All*.
- 1979 Spike appears in a cameo role in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*.
- 1980 Peter Sellers dies aged 55.
- 2001 Harry Secombe dies aged 79.
- 2002 Spike Milligan dies aged 83.

## The Ying Tong Song

*(Orchestral intro)*

Tenor: There's a song that I recall  
 My mother sang to me.

Spriggs (off): Oh! (a sigh)

Tenor: She sang it as she tucked me in  
 When I was ninety-three.

*(harp plays a rising chord...)*

Spriggs: I diddle, I. Who was that bum?

Bluebottle + Spriggs: Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po,  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong ying tong (bluebottle drops behind)  
 Ying tong iddle I po

Spriggs: Keep lad up. Keep.

Bluebottle: Keep up lad up.

Both: Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po

Spriggs: lad

Both: Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po (lad)  
 Iddle I po (lad)

Ying tong ying tong  
Ying tong (Spriggs: iddle) (Bluebottle: ying tong)  
Ying tong iddle I po  
Ying tong ying tong iddle

Bluebottle (*spoken*): Ying tong iddle I po!  
(*short raspberry, Secombe*)

Both: Oh!

Ying tong ying tong  
Ying tong ying tong  
Ying tong iddle I po  
Ying tong ying tong  
Ying tong iddle I po  
Iddle I po!

(*trumpet bit*)

Bluebottle: Ying. Ying tongy tongy.  
Ying tong iddle I po.  
Ying tong iddle I po.

(Secombe under this: What a lovely lovely boy!)  
(or Secombe under this: What a lovely melody devine!)

Ying ying ying tongy tongy.  
(Milligan: Get out the rifle, sir.)  
(or Milligan: Get off the record.)

Yeeeng.  
Ying tong ying tong d'gy-n'o.  
Ying tong d'ga.

(Secombe: Get away.)

D'g d'g d'ga.  
Ying tong iddle I po.

Seagoon: Hear that crazy rhythm  
Driving me insane.  
Strike your partner on the bonce (bonk?).  
(thump)

Eccles: Ooh. I felt no pain.  
(Seagoon screeches)

Seagoon, Bluebottle and Eccles: Ying tong ying tong  
Ying tong ying tong  
Ying...

(*harp chord rises*)

Soprano: Take me back to Vienna....

(*Raspberry section, probably Milligan*)

Bloodnok: Ohhhhh!  
Eccles: Oh!  
(*harp chord*)

Soprano: Take me back to Vienna, where the....  
*(crash!)*  
 Seagoon, Spriggs and Bluebottle (far off): Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
*(mad dash to foreground)*  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
 (Spriggs: where's he going lad?)  
 (BB: I don't know)  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po

Seagoon: LOOK OUT!  
*(cry from Bluebottle)*  
*(mad dash to distance)*  
*(hastily)*  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
*(dash to foreground)*  
 Ying tong...  
*(whine of bomb dropping, explosion)*  
 Double speed, but same tempo, Goons:  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
 Iddle I po.  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
 Iddle I po.

One: Ying! Tongy tongy tongy.  
 Yiddy diddy diddy da daaa. Ying diddy.  
 Ying tong diddle. Yiddada boo.

*(rhythmic thigh slapping, raspberry)*

All: Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
 Ying tong ying tong  
 Ying tong iddle I po  
 Iddle I po.

Eccles: Whoooooh!  
 I'm Walking Backwards For Christmas  
  
 I'm walking backwards for Christmas,  
 Across the Irish Sea,

I'm walking backwards for Christmas,  
It's the only thing for me.  
I've tried walking sideways,  
And walking to the front,  
But people just look at me,  
And say it's a publicity stunt.  
I'm walking backwards for Christmas,  
To prove that I love you.  
An imigrantal lad, loved an Irish colleen  
From Dublin Galway Bay.  
He longed for her arms,  
But she spurned his charms,  
And sailed o'er the foam away  
She left the lad by himself, on his own  
All alone, a-sorrowing  
And sadly he dreamed, or at least that's the  
way it seemed, buddy,  
That an angel choir for him,  
an angel choir did sing.

*(eerily)*

I'm walking backwards for Christmas,  
Across the Irish Sea.  
I'm walking backwards for Christmas,  
It's the finest thing for me.

*(normal)*

And so I've tried walking sideways,  
And walking to the front.  
But people just laughed, and said,  
"It's a publicity stunt".  
So I'm walking backwards for Christmas  
To prove that I love you.

*(play out)*

Spike: Thank you -- and for an encore

BlueBottle: 'Ere -- I didn't think much of that. I think my side was better

Spike: Get that child OUT OF HERE!

*(sound of BB getting kicked out of room)*

**From *The Goon Show* Web Site <http://www.thegoonshow.net/>**

# Character Summaries

*The Goons* included Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers and Harry Secombe. They burst onto the radio with surreal storylines, absurd logic, puns, catchphrases and groundbreaking sound effects. They ridiculed the pomposity of those in authority and laughed at the stupidity of mankind.

*The Goon Show* contained a very large number of characters. With only three main cast members, not only did each of them take on multiple roles, but the musicians and announcer were also often to be found in it - right in it!

The lead role of Neddie Seagoon was played by Harry Secombe, meaning that the other main characters often developed into loose double acts that could be played by Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers. These include Henry and Minnie, Grytpye-Thynne and Moriarty or Bluebottle and Eccles.

## Bluebottle

Played by Peter Sellers

A young, lustful boy scout with a squeaky voice who normally gets blown up in each episode. He is often a companion of Eccles and is willing to help anyone for sweets, although he frequently fails. Bluebottle is noted for using tools or weapons made from cardboard and string. He often reads his stage directions out loud and is always greeted with a deliberate round of applause from the audience. The character is based on real scout master with a squeaky voice.

Catchphrases include *"Enter Bluebottle, waits for applause...Not a sausage."*, *"You rotten swine, you deaded me"* and *"I don't like this game"*.

## Count Jim Moriarty

Played by Spike Milligan

Unscrupulous member of the French aristocracy who turned to crime to support his lifestyle. As *The Goon Show* developed, Moriarty descended from a refined criminal mastermind into a snivelling sidekick to Grytpye-Thynne. He is often found scavenging in dustbins looking for food and uttering meaningless foreign-sounding curses.

Catchphrases include *"Oooowwww"* and *"Sapristi nabolis"*.

## Eccles

Played by Spike Milligan

The Famous Eccles, complete and utter idiot. An amiable, well-meaning man with no wits or understanding. When people tell him to shut up, he frequently joins in and often goes on telling himself to shut up long after everyone else has given up. Eccles often finds himself helping Ned Seagoon alongside Bluebottle. His idiotic logic is considered to epitomize Goon humour.

Catchphrases include *"Hello der"*, *"Fine, fine, fine"*, *"I'm the famous Eccles"* and *"Shut up Eccles"*.



# Hercules Grytpype-Thynne

Played by Peter Sellers

A sleazy, well-educated and scheming cad. He generally collaborates with Count Moriarty to swindle Ned Seagoon.

Catchphrases include *"You silly twisted boy"* and *"Have a gorilla"*.

## Spike Milligan

***"Spike Milligan is a man whose contribution to British culture is incalculable. Since the second world war, in which he served, Spike Milligan has been central to the development of British comedy – one might also say to our actual sense of humour. Everyone knows that, in comedy, very little is truly original. Spike's work is part of that very little."***

Ben Elton

***"All I ask is the chance to prove that money can't make me happy."***

Spike Milligan

***"I think he widened the horizons of comedy. Created comedy out of things no-one else was able to. I think his work was deceptive, some of it looked very silly but it was incredibly complex."***

Michael Palin

## Stephen Dixon

Spike Milligan was once talking about Eccles, his favourite Goon Show character.

"Eccles represents the permanency of man, his ability to go through anything and survive. They are trying to get off a ship on the Amazon and lower a boat. When they get to the shore Eccles is already there.

"How did you get ashore?"

"Ho hum, I came across on that log."

"Log... that's an alligator!"

"Ooh. I wondered why I kept getting shorter."

That brief exchange, recognisable instantly as something only Milligan could have written, does tell us something about this troubled, gifted man, with his unique mind and puzzled pity for humanity.

Milligan never achieved Eccles's simple dream of happiness, and comedy is richer for his failure. He lived his life at the end of his mind's tether and was always a man of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions: an anarchist with a passion for conservation, a vulnerable and acutely sensitive exhibitionist, a sophisticated person who preferred to retain a vision of childlike purity.

He was often distinctly unsettling, both offstage and as a writer/performer. The writer and jazz singer George Melly, while admitting that Milligan was not the sunniest person all the time, added that his was "the greatest mind in what is loosely called comedy".

George Orwell's assertion that "whatever is funny is subversive" was never truer than in the case of Milligan. He didn't invent surrealistic radio comedy – nor did he ever claim to – but he opened up the medium with his uncluttered anarchic vision, and his influence since the early 1950s has been vast. It took its toll: "I was trying to shake the BBC out of its apathy. I had to fight like mad and people didn't like me for it. I had

to bang and rage and crash. I got it right in the end, and it paid off, but it drove me mad in the process... I'm unbalanced. I'm not a normal person, and that's a very hard thing to have placed upon you in life."

Milligan was educated at the Convent of Jesus and Mary, Poona, and, after his father was posted to Rangoon in 1929, at the Brothers de La Salle; the family stayed in Burma until 1933, when they returned to England to what Milligan described as a fairly impoverished life and where his education continued at the South East London Polytechnic in Lewisham. He worked in a nuts and bolts factory, but had already decided to become an entertainer, and learned to play the ukulele, guitar and trumpet. At one point he won a Bing Crosby crooning competition at the Lewisham Hippodrome.

When the war broke out he joined his father's old regiment and served in North Africa, where he first met Harry Secombe. He began to organise music and comedy shows for the armed forces entertainment organisation Ensa with Secombe and others, and was wounded in Italy. His war experiences later formed the basis for a number of bestsellers, including *Adolf Hitler, My Part In His Downfall* (1971), *Monty, My Part In His Victory* (1976) and *Mussolini, His Part In My Downfall* (1978).

Back in civvies in 1946, he formed a trio and started the weary round of agents and audition rooms. The act failed to generate any enthusiasm, and when it broke up Milligan "sort of wandered around". It was during these wanderings that he renewed his friendship with Secombe, who had been struggling along as a comic at the Windmill Theatre in London's West End which, in a pre-strip club era, provided static nude tableaux. He also made the acquaintance of another young hopeful, Peter Sellers, and the wild-haired and equally anarchic Michael Bentine.

All gravitated to Jimmy Grafton's pub in Westminster, where they would do turns in the back room to entertain each other. And it was there that the seeds of *The Goon Show* were sown.

Grafton was writing jokes for the radio comedian Derek Roy and, impressed by Milligan's unique view of the world, asked him to co-write some material. In this way Milligan wrote for several top comics of the day – Bill Kerr, Alfred Marks and even Frankie Howerd. He also wrote for Secombe and Sellers, who had started to become established, in a modest way, as radio performers. Sellers had the best contacts and first put the idea for *The Goon Show* to the BBC ("Goon" came from a strange being in the Popeye cartoons which Milligan loved).

The corporation was lukewarm, but agreed to give the show – starring Sellers, Milligan, Bentine and Secombe – a trial run under the title *Crazy People*. Thus it began in May 1951, swiftly changing its title and losing Bentine, whose surreal style clashed with Milligan's. It ran, with 26 shows a year, for nine years. It toured the variety theatres as a stage show in the early 1950s, and it was on this tour that Milligan's emotional imbalance began to assert itself. In Coventry his solo spot went badly and he strode to the footlights and raged at the audience: "You hate me, don't you?"

Receiving an affirmative, he threw his trumpet to the stage and stamped on it, and when this was greeted with appreciative applause, left the stage and locked himself in his dressing room. Knowing about their friend's mental instability, Secombe and Sellers broke down the door, fearing that he had tried to kill himself. He hadn't, but it was an omen of unhappy times to come.

Milligan, with or without Grafton or Larry Stephens, wrote all the shows, with Eric Sykes drafted in to help on occasion. Although the show could hardly have existed without Milligan's participation, his difficult behaviour kept him at constant loggerheads with the BBC. However, it was when the programmes ended – at Milligan's instigation – in 1960 that his personal demons started to dominate his private and professional life. "When *The Goons* broke up I was out of work," he said. "My marriage ended because I'd had a terrible nervous breakdown – two, three, four, five nervous breakdowns, one after another. *The Goon Show* did it. That's why they were so good."

Because of the "difficult" label, he almost had to beg for work, and the first to respond was the actor/manager Bernard Miles, who asked him to play Ben Gunn in *Treasure Island* at the Mermaid Theatre on the edge of the City of London. It was during its successful run that Milligan and John Antrobus wrote the bleak comedy *The Bed-Sitting Room*, which was set in the aftermath of the third world war. It, too, opened at the Mermaid, in 1963, with Milligan appearing as a sort of disruptive "chorus", and then went to the Duke of York's Theatre and the Comedy Theatre. In 1970 the play was made into a film.

His next piece, *Oblomov*, was just as successful, opening at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, in 1964. It was based on the Russian classic by Ivan Goncharov, and gave Milligan the opportunity to play most of the title role in bed. Unsure of his material, on the opening night he improvised a great deal, treating the audience as part of the plot almost, and he continued in this diverting manner for the rest of the run, and on tour as *Son Of Oblomov*.

In the late 1960s he did a number of television series, notably the *World Of Beachcomber* and *Q5*. He also became a favourite on TV chat shows, although it was with some trepidation that the host – be he Michael Parkinson, Eamonn Andrews or Terry Wogan – would introduce him. Milligan rarely had much of an inkling of what he was going to do, even at far more formal, scripted occasions. "I turn up on the day," he said. "They point me at the audience and I do it."

He also turned his attention to the cinema. His films included *The Magic Christian* (1971), *The Devils* (1971), *The Three Musketeers* (1973), *The Last Remake of Beau Geste* (1977) and Monty Python's *Life Of Brian* (1978). On the big screen there was not marked success, for it was impossible to get near the essence of Milligan in short, carefully rehearsed takes.

He worked harder than almost any entertainer one can think of, but seemed to have an imperfect grasp of what was good and what was dashed-off self-indulgence in his prolific output – a *Private Eye* cartoon in 1984 had a bookshop with a sign in the window: "Spike Milligan will be here to write his latest book at three o' clock." Novels, memoirs, verse – words gushed from him in a torrent.

He seemed to mellow in later years, but there was always a hint of the dangerous spark that had brought him to the brink of despair so many times and lit beacons of laughter to cleanse us all. In 2000, to a clutch of awards was added an honorary knighthood. It was honorary because – and earlier the cause of considerable furore – his father's Irish background meant that he was denied automatic British citizenship and thus the official title.

This article first appeared in *The Guardian*. Reprinted by permission of Stephen Dixon.

# Meeting Spike Milligan

Written by Geoff Kelso

In 2002, a few months after Spike had died, I (God Save John Howard) performed on stage in a tribute to Spike entitled *I Told You I Was Ill*. This live show at the Comedy Theatre in Melbourne was a fundraiser for one of Spike's favourite charities, the Friends of the Earth. It was incidentally (God Save John Howard) recorded by ABC local radio and then broadcast nationally – to a deaf cat (God Save John Howard). Here now is an almost verbatim transcript of the original ABC Sanskrit horsehair and plastic nuclear powered recording of me doing the highly steamed talking:

It was at the end of a show he [Spike] was doing at the Theatre Royal in Sydney. My friends and I, at that time (it was 1980) were writing and recording a radio show on Triple J, Double J as it was known then, called Dr Poo. It was a kind of silly version of Dr Who. One of the writers, Steve Johnson and I went to see his show and we took with us some badges that we had made for the fans of our show. Milligan was in great form, he had the Malcolm Fraser dummy on stage which he beat. He would get an audience member to come up and whack it, that was fantastic. And he'd run across stage and go "Ahhh!" – a cheap but noisy form of travel.

We went back to the stage door and it was an open house, he said, "Come in, come in, come in" and there was a fridge full of wine, "Here have some wine" and his mother was there and it was wonderful. He was chatting to everybody and we waited our turn to have a chat with him and eventually we did. We said "Mr Milligan, fantastic show, we do radio."

He said:

"Ah good, that's fantastic. I used to do radio. We used to do half a dozen ideas each and then make it up. You do that? Improvising, you know that? Good good."

"We'd like to give you these badges for the radio show we do."

"What's this, DC Pog?"

"No, No, Dr Poo."

"Toilet humour? Avoid toilet humour boys"

We looked at each other. Really? Did he mean it?

My friend Steve said, "Mr Milligan, we think that you have created half the Irish jokes in the world. Have you heard this one?"

"Go on, Ok"

"Have you heard about the Irish vet who tried to separate a Siamese cat?"

Spike actually genuinely laughed. "Oh that's great, that's wonderful." And then he said, "Alright, alright, here's one you can use".

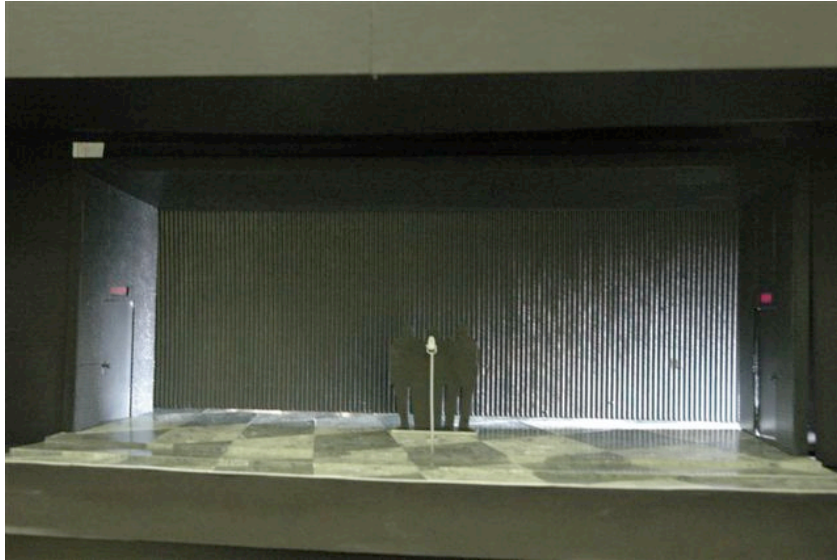
We looked at each other discreetly. Spike Milligan is going to give us a joke!

"Right, there's this man who is training his dog to fly to the moon on rollerskates. Every night he takes the dog outside and points it to the moon and says 'moon, moon'. We think the dog is catching on. There you can use that."

Thank you Mr Milligan. Thank you very much.

# Description of Scenery

Design by Michael Scott-Mitchell



Play starts with a full size drape mid-stage covering completely from OP to PS exposing only the DS section of the stage which is preset with a period microphone on a stand around which *The Goons* will perform. There are two doors DS, one OP and one PS they are like 'air-lock' studio doors with "on-air" signs above. There is a "studio proscenium" in front of the drape which will be a fixed height for Sydney Opera House and various heights for subsequent touring venues. The studio proscenium is approximately 9m wide.

Big shaft lighting effect from both sides to ensure all faces are lit.

The play begins with a crazy *Goon Show* with a lot of sound effects which ends with the *Ying Tong* song. The curtain mid-stage raises to reveal...



... a hospital ward. Spike Milligan is in bed under the sheet typing. His doctor: Greenslade sets the scene for the audience: "St Luke's psychiatric hospital 1960.



Set elements include the raked floor, two large walls one with a window and door in it, the other the first of a series of 5 archways leading US. The design includes an exaggerated vanishing point, thus all the walls reduce in height toward US. The tiling line also reduces in height toward US.

The furnishing elements are a desk and a chair and the bed. The bed moves from US to DS approximately 5 metres over 4 seconds sometimes with Spike Milligan in bed and sometimes empty. In keeping with the exaggerated vanishing point, the bed is not exactly square, it is larger at the foot end than the head end.



Although the studio doors from the radio studio remain visible, they are not part of the hospital, the main entry points into this scene is the door centre-stage in the wall (behind the desk) and the archways.



The arches are used as entry ways and each US side of each archway is separately lit.



The floor continues the exaggerated vanishing point theme and starts just DS of the proscenium in some venues, and slightly US of the proscenium in other venues.

The showfloor tops can sit on the stage floor or on a gentle rake. The extra transport of the rake and the longer lighting time required to focus from a rake will preclude some venues from using the rake.

When the rake is used, the floor will have extender pieces from Proscenium to Proscenium to ensure a complete seal for fire curtains.

The gradient of the rake is 1:12.5. It is 800mm high at the rear and 100mm downstage. It is 8200 metres from front to back. (Wheel chair access is 1:11 so it is a pretty gentle rake.) The rake has 9m of visible acting space DS and reduces to a point US. It is an almost triangular rake except for exits and entry areas added on.

# Interview with Actor, Jonathan Biggins

## Darkness and Laughter

In April this year, STC is staging a play by British playwright Roy Smiles: *Ying Tong - A Walk with The Goons*. *Currents* spoke to actor Jonathan Biggins about this surreal and tragicomic exploration of the life and work of Spike Milligan.

In 1944, Gunner Terence Alan Milligan of the 56th Heavy Regiment, Royal Artillery, was diagnosed with what was referred to at the time as 'battle fatigue'. Stammering uncontrollably, bursting into tears, zombified by heavy tranquillisers, he found himself in a psychiatric hospital with a mental breakdown. It was the first of many.

The time of Roy Smiles' play *Ying Tong - A Walk with The Goons* is 1960. Once again, Spike Milligan is in a psychiatric hospital. It is difficult to recognise the forlorn figure in the straitjacket as the popular author of *The Goon Show* - a radio phenomenon which has been running for nine years, and which is listened to and loved around the world. The pressure of writing a radio script every week has contributed to yet another breakdown. The blackness which first seized hold of him during the war has enveloped him once again.

As the despondent writer convalesces in the hospital ward, a procession of characters visits his bedside. They are his collaborators Peter Sellers, Harry Secombe and Wallace Greenslade. But as Spike descends into delusion and torment, they are transformed into phantoms from his past, characters from *The Goons*, German officers and sadistic doctors.

Through it all, as Milligan struggles through the mental fog to regain his equilibrium, his weapon of choice is humour. "There is a strong link between his own personal psychoses and what came out in *The Goon Shows*," says Jonathan Biggins. "One of the themes which the play explores is the link between madness and creativity. There's also a link between the sort of humour that Spike Milligan was writing and his wartime experiences. A lot of *The Goon Shows* are about army life, that whole kind of military society that grew up during the war, and then lasted in Britain for many years. The effect of the war was very strongly felt right through the Fifties."

Despite the concern that Sellers and Secombe feel for their suffering friend and collaborator, their visits to his hospital bed have an overriding motive: to persuade him to write another Goon Show. "It physically hurts me to write those bloody things. I can't do it anymore" says Milligan in the play. "What else would you do with your time?" asks Secombe. "I've got a packed schedule actually. As soon as you leave I'm committing suicide" is the gloomy response.

"These are the demands that are placed on creative people," says Jonathan Biggins. "When people want you to create something, they just want you to keep going with it. I think it's something that plagues a lot of writers nowadays, so they make a conscious decision, that's it, I'm going to make twelve episodes of *Fawlty Towers* and no more, or I'm going to make twelve episodes of *The Office* and no more. The only exception to the rule is *The Simpsons*, but they've got hundreds of people working on that, that really is a team effort.

But when you're relying on one guy to do everything, I think it does become very difficult. In my own modest way - and I don't dare to put myself in line with Milligan - but every time we do a revue, you think, here we go again. It's generating another ninety minutes of material; it's a lot harder than it looks, to do it over and over and over and over again. And every time you do it, people expect more of you."



While *Ying Tong* is about *The Goons* and their phenomenally successful radio show, it is first and foremost a new piece of theatre. As Biggins points out: “*The Goon Shows* were originally done live in front of a very large theatre audience anyway, so it was very much a theatrical experience that was captured on radio. Even when you were watching it there was always quite a bit to see, and part of its success is that it was done in front of a live audience. It was very much the interplay between the three performers, Wallace Greenslade, the jazz band and the sound effects guy - that was all part of the fun. There was also a lot of live banter and repartee between the performers and the audience that was an integral part of it. And the radio parts of the play are strongly balanced by the action of what’s happening to Milligan inside the asylum.”

As the actor who will be playing Peter Sellers, Biggins has an ambivalent view of his character: “Peter Sellers was not a very nice bloke; he was a fairly cruel person. He was very adept at being other people. But his true self was quite calculated and very self-centred, very egotistical. At the same time he was a great actor. I think there’s a sort of relentlessness with which he pursues Milligan to write this last series, because he knows that’s what makes him. As Sellers famously said: ‘I have no me, it’s just whatever character inhabits me, that’s who I am’, which can be a convenient excuse for some of the amoral or immoral behaviour that he carried on with. But he also found that *The Goons* were the most satisfying creative period of his life. He never had as much fun or as much fulfilment as he did doing *The Goons*.”

Through Roy Smiles’ play, Spike Milligan emerges as a tragic figure. As Biggins puts it: “He was a classic ‘tears of the clown’ - the funny man in public, yet deeply tormented in his private life. What makes it more interesting in Milligan’s case, though, is that it’s the war that did it to him. And he was able to articulate, in a humorous way, the suffering that all those guys went through. I mean, so few of us know these days what it’s like. We haven’t suffered those privations, thank goodness. But obviously, it deeply affected a lot of people, and the First World War even more so. Spike Milligan was able to find a voice for those people, and articulate it, but yet in a way that made them laugh. And that’s one of the great strengths of comedy. You can touch on very black subjects, and you’re still laughing. I think that’s very much the human condition. Particularly for those who are in anguish or are defeated, that’s where they find their solace and comfort, through humour.”

Elena Lonergan

*As Published in currents the STC subscriber magazine, Currents*

images courtesy of BBC ©. Quotes taken from the original bbc goon show series and are available on audio cd and dvd at abc stores and good book stores nationally.

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# The Sydney Morning Herald

## *Just the right voices to tackle Milligan*

Author: Reviewed by Lenny Ann Low

Publication: Sydney Morning Herald (11, Mon 16 Apr 2007)

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### THEATRE - REVIEWS

#### YING TONG: A WALK WITH THE GOONS

Opera House Drama Theatre, April 14

REPLICATING well-known people on stage is fraught with difficulties. And when those people are notorious for hiding behind a small army of fictional characters, the task is even harder.

The English playwright **Roy Smiles** has tackled just such a group of people with **Ying Tong**, his biographical, fantastical play about the *The Goon Show*, the much-loved and groundbreaking 1950s BBC radio series created by and starring Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers and Harry Secombe.

The crux of the play is Milligan's mental breakdown in 1960, brought on predominantly by the pressure of writing Goons scripts for nine years. Milligan is in St Luke's Psychiatric Hospital in London, depicted brilliantly here by designer Michael Scott-Mitchell as a dank 1950s catacomb of mildew-covered walls and perspective-skewing archways. From his lone, single bed, Milligan is haunted by hallucinations, fantasies and flashbacks.

Much of Milligan's anguish is traced to his experiences in World War II, the tortuous and absurd arena where he met Secombe, and his sense of isolation as the Indian-born son of an Irish father and an English mother.

**Geoff Kelso's** quick-witted and whiskered Milligan is superb, catching the comic's vocal modulations, facial movements and poetic chaos beautifully. Similarly **David James's** Secombe and **Jonathan Biggins's** Sellers more than balance Kelso's portrayal. Biggins displays a splendid capacity to move between renditions of Goons characters such as Major Dennis Bloodnok and Bluebottle and Sellers's oft-concealed self, while James ably inhabits the Welsh comic's good-hearted character and unwavering vigour in the face of Milligan's distressing mental frailties.

**Tony Harvey** delivers the role of Wallace Greenslade, the *The Goon Show's* classic BBC radio MC, among other hallucinatory characters, with aplomb.

For those not familiar with the Goons, **Ying Tong** will be a puzzling, though entertaining, introduction. Although biographical details occasionally interrupt the flow, Smiles's ability to render Milligan's anguished battle against his demons, and write plot sections as actual *Goon Show* episodes, reveals substantial insight and skill. Goons lovers will find a sensitively wrought and deftly played exploration of a much-missed comic team and the extraordinary gifts of an exceptional man's wounded mind.

*Sunday 22 April 2007*

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# The Sun-Herald

## *Funny face of a man in agony*

Author: Jason Blake

Publication: Sun Herald (21, Sun 22 Apr 2007)

Edition: First

### Reviews

**YING TONG: A WALK WITH THE GOONS**

Until May 19.

Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House.

Tickets \$60-\$73.

Bookings 9250 1777.

Critics rating 7/10

A LAUGH-OUT-LOUD play about mental illness? You'd better believe it. **Roy Smiles's Ying Tong** blends the absurd humour of radio's most enduringly funny show with a compassionate depiction of its author's acute depression.

Spike Milligan shifted British comedy's goalposts for good when he devised *The Goon Show*. Today, it is recognised as one of the most influential comedy series of the past 50 years. As well as celebrating the show's legacy (and cashing in on its nostalgia value), **Ying Tong** turns up the volume on what listeners of *The Goon Show* couldn't hear for laughing: the sound of a man in agony.

Milligan served in the Royal Artillery in North Africa and Italy during World War II before he was hospitalised for what used to be called, somewhat dismissively, shell shock. The trauma, amplified by bipolar mood disorder, would open the doors to a series of debilitating mental breakdowns in subsequent years, many brought on by a work schedule that required him to write and perform a new *Goon Show* script almost every week.

**Ying Tong** opens in a BBC radio studio with a clever *Goon Show* pastiche that acclimatises the audience to Milligan's eccentric humour and introduces his co-stars, Peter Sellers (**Jonathan Biggins**) and Harry Secombe (**David James**). But before the sketch can be completed, Milligan (**Geoff Kelso**) freezes on air. The action suddenly shifts to a spectacularly grim ward of a London psychiatric hospital, where Milligan spends the rest of the play in the grip of bipolar terrors, subjected to visits from demented doctors and Jewish leprechauns.

Kelso's Milligan is instantly recognisable. Although it's not as obvious a piece of mimicry as James's impersonation of the ebullient Secombe, he captures the rawness and anger of a man whose humour was often too jagged to laugh at comfortably.

laugh at comfortably.

Biggins is outstanding as the brilliant but ice-cold Sellers. His vowel-strangling impersonation of Sellers's Dr Strangelove is the comic highlight of the show. **Tony Harvey** offers sterling support throughout as BBC announcer Wallace Greenslade, the straightest of all straight men - even when he's dressed as a woman.

Smiles's script isn't perfect - there is a fair bit of biography disguised as dialogue and a jovially forced finale - but his comic bravado makes up for occasional triteness. Although **Ying Tong** feels constrained by the Drama Theatre's deadly architecture, director **Richard Cottrell**'s production is smoothly geared and designer Michael Scott-Mitchell's psych ward set, drawing on the wonky angles and disturbed perspective of expressionist cinema, works beautifully.

It goes without saying that Goon fans will love it but, even if you know nothing of the show and don't care for Milligan's humour, there's enough of the universal in **Ying Tong** to appeal to anyone interested in what makes a creative mind tick.

# THE Sunday Telegraph

## *Finding laughs as a Goon wrestles with depression*

Author: JO LITSON

Publication: The Sunday Telegraph (101, Sun 22 Apr 2007)

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### YING TONG: A WALK WITH THE GOONS

Sydney Theatre Company, Drama Theatre, Sydney Opera House until May 26

Spike Milligan is going gaga. He's been writing scripts for The Goon Show for nine years and he can't take it any more.

In the throes of a nervous breakdown, he is visited by a parade of surreal hallucinations and flashbacks: Peter Sellers naked save for a bowler hat and strategically placed newspaper, wisecracking leprechauns and a Nazi psychiatrist who's surely Sellers in disguise but then again might be a perfectly benign Scottish doctor.

Set in a BBC radio studio and a psychiatric hospital, **Roy Smiles'** play **Ying Tong: A Walk With The Goons** is a remarkably clever piece of writing that makes use of the zany style of The Goon Show to explore Milligan's mental fragility.

Rather than using existing Goons material, Smiles writes his own and he perfectly captures the inspired comic lunacy. The play is hilariously funny yet, at the same time, it plumbs Milligan's disturbed mind.

His wartime experiences, disorienting multicultural upbringing and the torturous pressure to keep delivering Goons scripts are all offered as possible causes of Milligan's depression.

Michael Scott-Mitchell's powerful set depicts the hospital as a dank, cavernous space with vaulting archways disappearing into the distance that suggest the dark recesses of Milligan's mind.

Under the assured direction of **Richard Cottrell**, the four-man cast is superb. **Geoff Kelso** has Milligan's vocal mannerisms down to a tee and gives a beautifully wry performance as the comic genius struggling to kill off his creations before they take him over.

**Jonathan Biggins** is brilliant as Sellers, a man who hides behind compulsive mimicry and can do any voice except his own. From Bluebottle to Doctor Strangelove, Biggins is hilarious.

**David James** portrays the generous-hearted Harry Secombe with enormous warmth and **Tony Harvey** is impressive as BBC announcer Wallace Greenslade.

Playing well-known real people is always daunting, but this cast does it with relish and skill. They also transform effortlessly into Goons characters and other people in Milligan's life. Knowing the Goons adds to the enjoyment but isn't vital. This is a marvellous production of a hugely entertaining play.

### MEDIA RELEASE

February 2007

## AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE PRODUCTION

YING TONG

A Walk with the Goons

By Roy Smiles

The legacy of Spike Milligan's comic genius can be seen in generations of British comedy from *Monty Python*, *The Goodies*, *The Young Ones* and *Little Britain*.

His unique life and ground-breaking work with The Goons is the subject of the UK's comedy success of 2005 – *Ying Tong – a Walk with the Goons* – making its Australian premiere with the Sydney Theatre Company at the Drama Theatre from 10 April.

Described as “*astonishingly funny*” (Telegraph, UK), “*hilarious and deeply moving*” (Financial Times, UK), *Ying Tong* is a tribute to an exceptionally talented, but troubled man who created one of the best-loved comedies of our time.

A group of Australia's foremost actor-comedians play The Goons; Jonathan Biggins (from the STC's Wharf Revue), Tony Harvey, David James and Geoff Kelso.

*Ying Tong* shows Spike at the height of his success, under pressure to deliver a new *Goon Show* script. He suffers a nervous breakdown and has to be hospitalised. The audience is transported into his crazy world and witnesses his struggle to maintain some mental equilibrium. There are flashbacks to Milligan's youth, early career and experiences as an army officer in World War II. His fantasies are peopled by Adolf Hitler, leprechauns, dispassionate hospital staff and famous Goon Show characters Eccles, Bluebottle and Neddie – all written in the trademark eccentric and unconventional Milligan style.

Writer Roy Smiles describes his close affinity with the plays' subject matter: “The Goons were the sound of my childhood. All my uncles and aunties used to do Bluebottle and Eccles impressions. My older brother had all the records and scripts. Of course, a lot of the Beatles humour was based on them. If you watch ‘*A Hard Days Night*’ Lennon is doing Goonish voices all the time. So you couldn't avoid their influence growing up in 60's Britain. Certainly Monty Python wouldn't have existed without them.’

*Ying Tong* tours to eight venues around Australia including Sydney, Melbourne, Wollongong, Brisbane, Newcastle, Geelong and Hobart.

WRITER Roy Smiles DIRECTOR Richard Cottrell DESIGNER Michael Scott Mitchell  
LIGHTING DESIGN Damien Cooper COMPOSER Paul Charlier

## Websites

<http://www.goonshowguide.co.uk/> - General overview and lots of short sound clips.

<http://www.whirligig-tv.co.uk/radio/index.htm> - Great site dedicated to 1950's British television and radio nostalgia.

<http://www.hexmaster.com/goonscripts/> - goon show scripts at your fingertips

It is worth a chat with those who were weekly listeners at the time of the original series for some further insight.

Students should be reminded that the original series began before television and even after it was not generally available to most. That the radio listener was also an expert in the visual referencing that was such a radio show – this surreal and very very ‘out there’ program. They were experts at following radio. It was not unlike television can be today with the entire family sitting watching – at the time of *The Goon Show* the entire family – or friends group would sit around the radio (they were typically the size of televisions).

The next day at work or school or college/university everyone was talking about the program and reciting and repeating the funniest catchphrases. As the show was only half an hour long and once a week – its life beyond that presentation was extended by its addicted audience. It might even be worth a download of the show – It is presently playing once a week on radio National at 5.30 in the morning.

## Is *Ying Tong* Satire?

*Ying Tong* is an insightful comic drama and from its content might be misconstrued as docu-drama. It is much more than that. It exposes the subtle violence and unacknowledged residual impact of WWII on an individual and through the long running radio show, one man's devices to keep post traumatic stress disorder at bay – Spike Milligan is that man and his work, “*The Goon Show*”.

Although *Ying Tong* may not be a satire outright, what it was about “*The Goon Show*” definitely contained satirical elements. Smiles is with this play quite caustic and very, very serious about the issues he covers in this comedy at its core. He gets away with covering so many of societies “issues” of the time, as directly and deliberately revealed in the mind and person of Spike Milligan, because that is how real life and real people are! Even though the entire play might be a surreal bent of one man suffering a mental illness. I might add that most theatre success has as a key element a very real truth at its core that defines us. You, me and the everyman.

It is also summarised towards the end of Roy Smiles play – Secombe says: “The war made people like us, boy. What was *The Goons* if it wasn't an attack on every pompous twit officer we ever met? Write about what made you, boy.” The war was the biggest thing that happened to many like Spike. He missed it I guess and the camaraderie that came with it. He had tried to re-create this bond in *The Goon Shows*. The characters went on missions, bombs fell about (sound effects) and soldiers of either side wandered in and out.

In *Ying Tong* there is an abundance of life's dilemmas. More importantly it evokes a time of WWII horror that no one wants to recall or realise. All this inside the fall about

aural slapstick that was *The Goon Show* on radio. Characters slipping in and out with just the voice as the main device. The playwright has cleverly woven the same characters visually in the main characters flashbacks and surreal visions. These take us through the Spike Milligan story which is just as surreal it would seem as his comedy writing. A fair attempt to revisit the actual Goon Shows by Roy Smiles will have smiles not only on the faces of those who have experienced the original Goons but will introduce a whole new audience.

*The Goon Show* was as addictive in its day as perhaps the Chaser series may become. With characters familiar and each week revisited, with political and social satire at its core. Everyone can find something that touches their funny bone it would seem. *The Goon Show* was that, then. It has so obviously influenced The Monty Python Team and other television like, the Simpsons and perhaps even more obviously South Park – which has not so important visuals as its voice over the animation with layers of subtleties that are drawn from the both the depths of the politically incorrect and ‘toilet’ humour, through to the highbrow super referenced. So too was *The Goons Shows*.

## Definitions

Reference: M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1996

### Satire

Abrams has defined Satire as "the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation or scorn. It differs from the comic in that Comedy evokes laughter as an end in itself, while satire "derides"; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a subject existing outside the work itself. That subject may be an individual (in personal satire) or a type of person, a class, an institution, a subculture or even the whole human race as in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The distinction between the comic and the satiric is a sharp one only at its extremes.

... Satire has usually been justified by those who practise it as a corrective of vice and folly; Alexander Pope, the eighteenth century poet, remarked that "those who are ashamed of nothing else are so of being ridiculous." Its claim (not always borne out in practice) has been to ridicule the failing rather than the individual..... Satire occurs as an incidental element in many works whose overall form is not satiric - in a certain character, or situation, or ironic commentary on some aspect of the human condition or contemporary society." (Pp 153-154). Ridicule, irony, exaggeration, and similar tools are almost always used in satire.

The term 'humour' refers to what is purely comic: it evokes sympathetic laughter, or else laughter which is an end in itself. Humour is the harmless form of the comic...In satire we are made to laugh at a person not merely because he or she is ridiculous, but because he or she is being ridiculed - the laughter is derisive, with some element of contempt or malice, and serves as a weapon against its ridiculous subject.

### Irony

In Greek comedy the character called the eiron was a 'dissembler', who characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the alazon - the self-deceiving and stupid braggart. In most of the diverse critical uses of the term "irony" the difference between what is asserted and what is actually the case, or dissimulation, defines the ironic situation. (page 80)



**Dramatic irony**

Dramatic Irony involves a situation in a play in which the audience shares with the playwright knowledge of which a character is ignorant; The character acts in a way grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances, or expects the opposite of what fate holds in store, or says something that anticipates the actual outcome, but not at all in the way that he or she means it.

Milligan was a master of the fabulous Goon catchphrase: (find examples in the character summaries)

**Pathos**

(Greek, "emotion"): In its rhetorical sense, pathos is a writer or speaker's attempt to inspire an emotional reaction in an audience--usually a deep feeling of suffering, but sometimes joy, pride, anger, humour, patriotism, or any of a dozen other emotions.

Pathos is the use of language, examples, diction, or images to create an emotional reaction in the reader. The most common types are anger at a social injustice, sympathy for another's misfortune, or laughter at a humorous or illogical state of affairs.

In its critical sense, pathos signifies a scene or passage designed to evoke the feeling of pity or sympathetic sorrow in a reader or viewer.

## Before the Play

Before seeing the play – discuss in small groups why theatre is a good forum to tell a story. Bring your thoughts back for whole class discussion.

What are some key things that happen in theatre and stage drama eg: set design, lighting, dramatic timing, creation of focus – and how are they made to happen.

*The Goon Show* was a radio show taped before a live audience. What difference would this have made to the show and content as well as the performers?

Research the actors who made *The Goon Show* and find out what else made them famous. Harry Secombe, Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan.

Research some definitions of humour – satire and parody in particular.

## After the Play

After the play – discuss the style and form. Comic elements inside the surreal presentation of the story.

How much was real or was all the content Spike's mad mind?

Describe the set design and what it 'said' to the audience in support of the play.

What in particular were features of the costume design – discuss in small groups and report back. (ie: muted and hyper or surreal colours used in the two outfits of the lead characters / special characters like the leprechauns and the Freudian doctor (Dr Strangelove? the British commander)

How was sound important in this play? What choices did the sound designer make? Was the play funny for you? Did you 'get' all the jokes? How would you describe the humour?

The play has a quality of 'Pathos'. How does this come about amongst the humour? Discuss the structure of the play – how it might compare to an actual *Goon Show* structure.

Student Review (submitted to STC for publication in Currents and On-line)

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