

In the second part of our interview with the author of *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* and *Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, John Fleming talks to the writer about the different versions of his story that have been produced.

**Starburst:** *Why is it you feel that the stage production of Hitch Hikers Guide at the Rainbow Theatre [London] was "a fiasco"?*

**Adams:** The first two productions had worked well largely because they'd been performed to relatively intimate audiences. The I.C.A. [*Institute of Contemporary Arts, London*] was only 80 and I suppose the largest Theatre Clwyd audience was about 400. But you put it in something the size of The Rainbow — a 3000-seater theatre — and, because *Hitch-Hiker* tends to be rather slow-moving and what is important is all the detail along the way... You put it in something that size and the first thing that goes straight out the window is all the detail. So you then fill it up with earthquake effects and lasers and things. That further swamps the detail and so everything was constantly being pushed in exactly the wrong direction and all the poor actors were stuck on the stage desperately trying to get noticed by the audience across this vast distance. If you'd put the numbers we were getting at The Rainbow into a West End theatre, they would have been terrific audiences — 700 a night or whatever. But, in a 3000-seat theatre, 700 is not a lot,

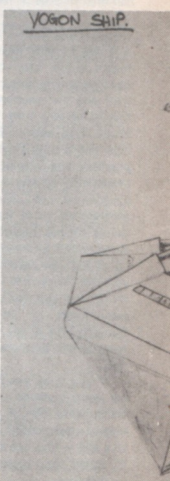
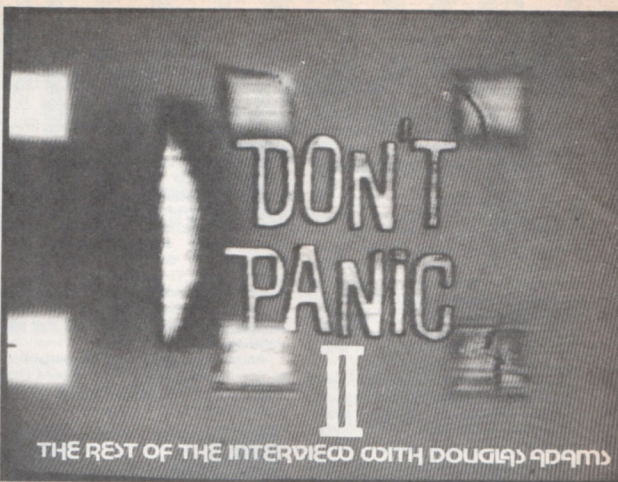
particularly when you (the producers) are paying for 3000 seats. So the whole thing was a total financial disaster.

*There was also talk of a film.*

Well, I've been into that twice and each time I've backed out. I knew we were going to be doing it for BBC-tv anyway and I knew we could do it all on telly. In the first film deal that was being set up, the American guy who was going to be directing it... I began to feel we were

talking about different things and he wanted to make *Star Wars* with jokes. We seemed to be talking about different things and one thing after another seemed not quite right and I suddenly realised that the only reason I was going ahead with it was the money. And that, as the *sole* reason, was not a good enough reason. Although I have to get rather drunk in order to believe that.

[Laughter] It had got to the stage where



Left: Marvin the Paranoid Android, a character from the Hitch Hikers Guide. Above: A member of the catering race, The Dentrassi, who serve as the in-flight caterers on Vogan demolition vessels. Right: A Vogan demolition ship. The ship hovers above Earth in the opening moments of Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy and announces to Earth that the planet is about to be demolished to make way for an interstellar by-pass. All sketches by BBC tv visual effects designer Jim Frances. Top left: Our title lettering is taken from the cover of that remarkable book *The Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy*, which has, inscribed on its cover in large friendly lettering, the words "Don't Panic". Top right: Author Douglas Adams.



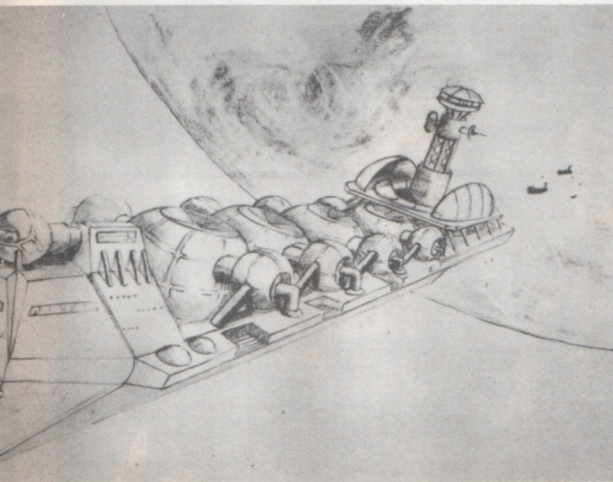
I just had to sign a piece of paper and would instantly have £50,000 up-front, so I was quite pleased with myself for not doing that. So, I thought *There's no point in doing a film at the moment*. Then the whole thing re-opened when Terry Jones of *Monty Python*, who's a great friend of mine, said he'd like to think about making a film of *Hitch-Hiker*. So I thought *That sounds like a nice idea* but the original idea was to do something

based fairly solidly round that first radio series and I just didn't want to do that *again*. I'd done it on radio, on stage, on record, in a book and was now doing it on television. It just seemed a *pointless* waste of time to do the same story again on film. So we then thought it would be much more worthwhile to do a new story. But then we had the problem of having to do a story which was, on the one hand, totally consistent with what

had gone before for those who knew what had happened and, on the other hand, totally self-contained for the sake of those who didn't. And that began to be a terrible conundrum and I just couldn't solve it. So, in the end, Terry and I just said "It'd be nice to do a film together, but let's just start from scratch again and not make a *Hitch-Hiker*."

*I was surprised when I first heard about the tv series and the film because I thought the series was un-visualisable.*

Well, obviously, there *are* things you lose when you move onto television in that what you actually see *restricts* what you imagine whereas, on radio, what you hear *provokes* what you imagine. On the other hand, there are all sorts of things I think *are* worthwhile. One of the great strengths of the television series is those wonderful animated graphics. If you'd been sitting down to do something like *Hitch-Hiker* for television to begin with, there are all sorts of things it wouldn't have occurred to you to do. Like having a narrator who talks all the time: you just don't normally have that on television. But we were committed to that because of its success on radio. Having to translate something from one medium to another, you have to find solutions to problems which normally wouldn't have posed themselves. Finding those solutions is interesting and that's how we got those graphics. If you were doing a BBC television programme normally, you would just not gratuitously attempt to have one character with two heads. It just poses far too many problems. But, being committed to that, we had to do it. So they built this head which is a quite





remarkable construction. It's moulded from Mark Wing-Davey's own head and the neck movement side-to-side and up-and-down, the eye and the mouth and the eyebrow and the cheek are all radio-controlled. It's an extraordinary feat. Something you would not have got except in the process of translating one medium to another. You're committed to things you otherwise wouldn't have tackled.

*Like those wonderful computer read-outs for the book.*

The computer read-outs are all animated. I'd assumed one would do it as computer graphics and actually use a real computer to do it, but apparently that is incredibly expensive. So it was done by animation, which is more effective.

*I saw the completed version of the first episode at the Edinburgh Television Festival way back in August. Why was it finished so early? Because it was a pilot?* Well, a sort of pilot. "Pilot" can mean several things. In some cases, a pilot episode is made and broadcast to see how the audience reacts to it. This was a different sort of pilot. The BBC had said *We're committed to doing the series. But we want to do the first one separately so we can see we're doing it right. And then we have the opportunity of changing things.* In fact, that isn't quite how it worked out. When the bills came in for the first programme, there was a certain amount of stunned shock and back-peddling on whether or not they were going to do the rest of the series. Then they said *Yes, we will go ahead, but try to be a little more careful.* (Laughs) *One of the most popular characters is*



Above: Monty Python's Graham Chapman and Roger Brierly as they appeared in the BBC tv comedy show *Out of the Trees*. Below: Chapman and Brierly as the mighty Ghengis Khan and son from *Out of the Trees*. Right: The cast of the BBC Radio series *The Burkiss Way* (clockwise from top left) Fred Harris, Nigel Rees, Jo Kendall and Chris Emmett. Far right: The incredible Zaphod Beeblebrox as seen in the stage play of *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy*.

*Marvin the Paranoid Android. I believe he came from a specific...*

Yes, Andrew Marshall. He's one of the writers of *The Burkiss Way* and *End of Part One*. He co-wrote the radio series *Hordes of the Things* with John Lloyd, which was a sort of parody of *Lord of the Rings*. Very silly.

*You're really part of a third generation of Cambridge comedy writers. There was Beyond The Fringe and TW3 lot. Then*

*the I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again, Goodies and Monty Python lot. And now there's The Burkiss Way, End of Part One, Not The Nine O'Clock News, Hitch-Hiker and so on. The generation after Monty Python.*

I suppose so. But in that generation one major programme sat on the top of the pile, which was Python. I think all my way through Cambridge I desperately wanted that to happen all over again. I





wanted to function as part of a group of writer-performers. But, you see, a radical change had come over the way things were organised. In those days — the time that produced *Python* — the writer-performer was the kingpin. That was true in *Footlights* and in the shows that those guys then went on to do. So it was the guys themselves who were doing it and they came together and a producer was given to them just to get it onto the screen and make it work. In my day, *The Footlights* had become a producer's show. So a producer is there to say what the show is going to be — a student producer or, more likely, someone who was at Cambridge two years previously who's come back to do it. He says *I want so-and-so in it and I want so-and-so to write it* and they're appointed and the producer calls the tune. I think that's wrong. That's what's true in *Not The Nine O'Clock News*. I'll get into trouble for saying this but I think that's wrong: it just makes it slightly too artificial. My year in the Cambridge *Footlights* was full of immensely talented people who never actually got the chance to really work together properly, because they were all working for somebody else rather than getting together. So it was very fragmented and you get on the one hand *Hitch-Hiker*, which is written by one person with actors employed to do it, and on the other hand *Not The Nine O'Clock News*, which is a producer's show being sort of driven from the back seat. And there's nothing central that has come out of my Cambridge generation.

*How many years of your life have you spent on Hitch-Hiker now?*



Four. The first time it actually crept into my life was the end of 1976.

*Are you actually interested in science fiction?*

Yes and no. I always thought I was interested until I discovered this enormous sub-culture and met people and found I knew nothing about it whatsoever. I always used to enjoy reading the odd science fiction book. Having done *Hitch-Hiker* and *Dr Who* for this length of

time, I now find it virtually impossible to read science fiction, which is simply a measure of the extent of which I've been saturated with it. I'm a bit nervous, at the moment, of being pigeon-holed as a science fiction writer, which I'm not. I'm a comedy writer who happens to be in science fiction.

*There's the double problem that you're thought of as a science fiction person and as a comedy writer. So, if you wanted to*



write a serious book...

I don't think I could do a serious book anyway: jokes would start to creep in. *You're not like a stand-up comic who, deep down, wants to play Hamlet?* No, you see, I actually think comedy's a serious business, although I may not give that impression. I was being interviewed the other day by a woman from the *Telegraph Magazine* who'd read the new book (*The Restaurant at the End of The Universe*) and was asking me all sorts of questions and I was being fairly flippant about it and I think she got rather disappointed, because she expected me to be much more serious about it than I was being. I think that comes about because, when you're actually working on something, you have to take it absolutely seriously; you have to be totally, passionately committed to it. But you can't maintain that if you're going to stay sane. So, on the whole, when I talk about it to other people I tend then to be quite flippant about it. Because I'm just so glad to have got through it. (Laughs) You say *Ah well, it's just that. It's just jokes.* She was saying she thought the second book was much weightier than the first, which surprised me. I wasn't aware of that.

*Presumably the reason the first book didn't include the last two episodes of the original radio series was that you hadn't totally written them yourself and you weren't totally happy with them.*

Yes. I also wanted to keep those last two episodes for the end of the second book. *Were you not totally happy with the second radio series?*

No. You see, the first series was written and re-written and re-written and worked on very, very heavily. The second series I



Above: *The Doctor* (Tom Baker) and his assistant *Romana* (Mary Tamm) as seen in the *Doctor Who* episode *The Pirate Planet*, written by Douglas Adams. Below: The team of Tom Baker (as the Doctor), Graham Williams (producer) and Douglas Adams (script editor) transformed the *Doctor Who* tv show into a whimsical comedy series.

had to do under immense pressure while I was doing other things as well. There was an element of desperation in writing it. Also, the first time round, it was my own, private little world which only I really knew about. Writing the sequel series was like running round the street naked because suddenly it's become everyone else's property as well. Most of the second series was first draft, as opposed to fourth draft. So about 2/3 of the second book actually comes from

episodes 5 and 6 of the first series. The first 1/3 of it was a re-structured plotting of aspects of the second series. I think it works out better like that, although it meant I had to write the book backwards. I couldn't get the thing started and it held me up and held me up and held me up and eventually I wrote the last bit, then the bit before that and the bit before that — and the beginning was worked out, more or less, by a process of elimination. *It's all been very successful, though.*

I now have a company and everything goes through the company. It's called Serious Productions. I decided most people I know with companies had silly names for them, so I decided I wasn't. I was going to have a Serious name. *How do you get out of the trap of being forever 'The man who wrote Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy'?*

Well, by doing something else, really. I think we'll probably do a second tv series although it's by no means certain. I think it's on the cards and, if we did, then it would be a totally new series written for television rather than adapted. And that, as far as I'm concerned, would be the end of *Hitch-Hiker*.

*And you would go on to...*

I want to write a book from scratch to prove that I can do it. I've now written two books which are based on something I'd already written. That's not quite kosher. And I would like to write a stage-play because that was the one failure *Hitch-Hiker* had. And I'd like to write a film. These are all fairly wishy-washy ideas at the moment, but that's what I'd like to do... Oh, and I'd like to be a guitarist.

