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CONCORD
THEATRICALS

SPIKE

by Ian Hislop & Nick Newman

SAMUEL FRENCH

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SPIKE was first presented at the Watermill Theatre, Newbury, on 27 January 2022, with the following cast:

SPIKE MILLIGAN ..... John Dagleish
JANET ..... Margaret Cabourn-Smith
PETER SELLERS ..... George Kemp
HARRY SECOMBE ..... Jeremy Lloyd
DENIS MAIN-WILSON/PETER ETON ..... James Mack
ELLIE MORRIS ..... Ellie Morris
BBC EXECUTIVE ..... Robert Mountford
ANNOUNCER ..... Stephen Fry

The touring production included

SPIKE MILLIGAN ..... Robert Wilfort
PETER SELLERS ..... Patrick Warner
MYRA ..... Tesni Kujore
BBC ANNOUNCER ..... Peter Dukes
DOCTOR ..... Sam Ducane

Other parts were played by members of the company.

Director	Paul Hart
Designer	Katie Lias
Composer	Tayo Akinbode
Lighting designer	Rory Beaton
Sound Designer	Tom Marshall
Associate Director	Robert Kirby
Movement Director	Anjali Mehra
Foley Sound Consultant	Ruth Sullivan
Produced by	Karl Sydow and David Parfitt

A Karl Sydow, Trademark Films, PW Productions and Watermill Theatre Production

CHARACTERS

SPIKE MILLIGAN – 35. Manic, anarchic, rebellious, troubled and troublesome comic genius who is scarred by WW2 and on the brink of changing comedy forever. With his landmark radio comedy *The Goon Show*, he is now fighting a new war with the BBC.

PETER SELLERS – 32. The man of many voices – but rarely his own. A suave, seductive film-star in the making, he is possibly as crazy as Spike.

HARRY SECOMBE – 32. A jovial extrovert and multi-talented performer – and the voice of reason in the Goons. A natural peacemaker and the rock all can turn to.

JANET – 30s. A Foley Artist producing live sound effects and general production assistant. Undervalued, underpaid and the lifeblood of the BBC – who ensures programmes are completed on time

DENIS MAIN-WILSON – 29. Exasperated but brilliant producer of the early Goon Shows, who is constantly having to defend Spike against BBC management.

JUNE – 30. Spike's half-Italian, long-suffering wife, therapist and nursemaid, who has to deal with his tantrums and depression.

PETER ETON – 34. Genial, avuncular, no-nonsense ex-drama BBC producer who supports Spike whilst standing up to him. Eton instils vital discipline in the anarchic *The Goon Show*.

BBC EXECUTIVE – 30s. Spike's BBC nemesis He is officer class and embodies all the worst traits of 1950s management including pomposity, sexism and callousness.

MAJOR JENKINS – 30s. Spike's military nemesis – embodying all the worst traits of 1940s army officers including pomposity, officiousness and callousness.

MYRA – 30s. Harry Secombe's loving and loyal wife who keeps him grounded at all times.

THE CRITICS – archetypal media pundits who earnestly compete to say more ludicrous things about *The Goon Show*. Prone to hyperbole (though the quotes featured are real).

MILDRED – 30s. The BBC Executive's repressed, more open-minded and intelligent wife.

PETER BROUGH – star radio ventriloquist with his puppet Archie.

BBC ANNOUNCER – classic plummy-voiced BBC announcer of the kind you don't hear any more.

FEMALE REPORTER – well-spoken thrusting *Radio Time*s hackette.

DOCTOR – sympathetic foil to hard-nosed Major Jenkins.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

SPIKE IN THE EYE

Spike Milligan enjoyed a long association with the magazine that gave Ian Hislop and myself our break in comedy writing.

As a cartoonist and writer for *Private Eye* for over 40 years, I've been acutely aware of Spike Milligan's presence in the magazine. Spike first appeared in *Private Eye* issue number 10, in 1962 – bewailing his statelessness in a letter trailed on the cover as 'The poet Milligan speaks.' The framed letter still hangs in the *Private Eye* offices. In his tome *Private Eye – the First 50 Years*, *Private Eye*'s historian Adam MacQueen records that Issue 11 brought better news: "I have been granted Welsh citizenship, provided I stay on a mountainside and only say 'Baa'."

Former *Private Eye* Editor Richard Ingrams recalls that "Spike was always a terrific fan of *Private Eye*. He would constantly send things in. I'd always put them in." Over the years, Spike contributed many letters and jokes to the magazine. In 1964 he wrote an entire page about the new pirate radio station Radio Caroline, entitled 'Spike Milligan Shouts Ahoy There'. He also drew cartoons. These were immensely encouraging to me as an aspiring cartoonist. The drawings were naïve at best – and showed that you didn't have to be an expert draughtsperson to be a funny cartoonist.

In 1966, when the magazine ran into financial trouble – facing enormous costs for lost libel cases – Spike helped the Eye out by performing in a benefit concert entitled 'The Rustle of Spring'. This followed a libel action by Lord Russell of Liverpool , who sued the magazine for suggesting that a book he had written about Nazi war crimes was actually pandering to salacious and sadistic tastes. It cost the magazine £5,000 damages and £3,000 costs – the equivalent of £1340,000 today. Spike performed alongside a host of names from the satire boom, including Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, John Bird, David Frost and Willie Rushton – as well as top comedians such as Peter Sellers and Bob Monkhouse.

Later, the Eye would produce Spike Milligan merchandise – such as 'Milligan's Mug' – a mug bearing four images of Spike with the caption 'The Face that launched a thousand ships.' The caption was intended to read 'The face that launched a thousand quips', but the then Art Director and designer Tony Rushton misheard Milligan down the telephone. Spike was surprisingly good-humoured about the error. Milligan also contributed to a fund-raising floppy disc 'The Sound of Talbot' in 1980 – a joke about Sir James Goldsmith's recently launched and ultimately failing *Now* magazine.

Richard Ingrams had connections with Spike which predated the Eye's launch. In 1961 he directed a production of Milligan's post-apocalyptic satire *The Bedsitting Room*, starring Willie Rushton. Says Ingrams, "Before *Private Eye* I was running a theatre company. We went to Spike and asked him to write a play. He fished out this one he'd already written, with John Antrobus. Spike didn't think it was very good." Audiences disagreed – it opened in Canterbury and transferred to the West End. Ingrams would later feature as an announcer alongside Eye contributor John Wells in Spike's 'Q' TV series – and although he wasn't a fan of the *Goon Show*, Ingrams saw Spike as a genius. Ingrams wrote in the Guardian, "Like many men of genius Spike went through life nourishing a resentment that his talents were not sufficiently appreciated. In Spike's case, the special focus of his hostility was the BBC." *Private Eye* staff were familiar with Spike ringing up out of the blue and cursing down the line about his treatment by the Corporation.

Spike's interest in the magazine also reflected his respect for the Eye's proprietor Peter Cook, who bought the magazine in 1962 after starring in the hit satirical revue Beyond the Fringe. The admiration was mutual. When at school at Radley, Cook would feign illness to gain access to the school sanatorium on a Friday night, in order to listen to the *Goon Show* on the wireless. In 1955, aged 17, Cook wrote a radio script which was rejected by the BBC because it was too similar to *The Goons*. So similar was it that the BBC's Peter Titherdge pointed out that it was actually a very good Goon script – and it eventually landed on Spike's desk. Milligan was so impressed that he invited Cook up to lunch in London. Quite what Spike made of the schoolboy when he arrived is unknown – and sadly neither Cook nor Milligan could subsequently remember what was discussed, according to Cook's biographer Harry Thompson. When at Cambridge, Cook wrote sketches for Footlights student revues that were infused with Milligan influences. Characters such as F.Nidgcombe, Arthur Frad and Larry Splutt bear all the hallmarks of the Goons.

Over the next 40 years Cook and Milligan would work together sporadically – appearing on each other's TV shows and in films together. They even collaborated on a 'Beyond the Fringe meets The Goons' project – a parody of 'Bridge Over the River Kwai' entitled *Bridge Over the River Wye* – in which Cook and Jonathan Miller performed alongside Milligan and Peter Sellers. While Cook was celebrated as a savage satirist, his contributions to the Eye were often Milliganesque nonsense pieces involving large killer bees.

So Spike's spirit loomed large over *Private Eye*. Ingrams's successor as *Private Eye* Editor – my colleague Ian Hislop – had his own encounter with Spike in the mid 1980s when he interviewed Spike for Radio 4's 'Midweek' radio show. "Spike was the birthday guest, and in those days they were presented with a bottle of champagne." Says Ian. "It was live

and on air, and I opened the bottle only for it to explode all over my notes written in green ink, which left me with an unreadable sea of green. Spike thought it hilarious, and he helped me out by interviewing himself, asking himself questions. He loved things going wrong. He loved the anarchy."

Spike's most celebrated association with the Eye was when he placed a lonely hearts advertisement in the small ads at the back of the magazine. It read 'Spike Milligan seeks rich, well-insured widow. Intention: murder.' He received 48 replies.

Nick Newman

ACT ONE

Scene One

(A 1950s BBC radio studio. We see an empty stage apart from a desk full of interesting and strange objects. There are a pair of shoes, a miniature door frame, an umbrella, a pile of audio tape, a biscuit tin, a swanee whistle, a ruler, a hot water bottle, a series of buzzers and bells on a board, and a pair of coconut shells. There is a also a tray full of gravel and a record player for playing 78 rpm discs. **JANET** *the foley artist and sound effects wizard enters to address the audience.)*

JANET. The BBC Sound Effects Department is the finest in the world. Its job is to produce convincing representations of a wide range of audio experiences for both radio drama and comedy on the Home Service and Light programme. We often perform live during recordings and it is the job of the spot effects operator to illustrate the narrative with suitable noises. So when Special Agent Dick Barton makes a routine call to a suspicious house we hear his footsteps up the drive way...

(She puts the shoes on her hands and crunches them on the gravel tray...)

...then he rings the doorbell...

(She rings a bell on the tray...)

Only to find that when the door opens…

(She makes the sound of door opening dragging a ruler across a ridged hot water bottle.)

It's the lair of the heavily armed master criminal who shoots at him…

(She makes a twanging sound with a ruler.)

…with his bow and arrow. So Dick has to make a run for it…

(She puts the shoes on her hands again and rapidly recreates a running sound…)

…through the bushes…

(She rustles the audio tape.)

… Startling some birds who fly away…

(She opens and closes the umbrella.)

…then crashing into some dustbins…

(She shakes the biscuit tin full of broken glass and coins.)

Before finally making his escape… on a horse…

(She picks up the coconuts and makes a galloping noise, fading into the distance.)

So all totally convincing… but sometimes we need something more sophisticated to transport the listener out of their cosy living room into another world. The BBC is of course at the forefront of technological advances.

(She unveils a very elderly looking gramophone player.)

...and has the largest sound effects library in the world, with thousands of different noise-scapes all stored on the latest 78 rpm acetate discs.

(She gets out a few discs...)

We have everything from a cistercian monastery...

(We hear echoey chanting...)

To an Ethiopian village market...

(We hear chickens, goats and cries of villagers.)

To complete silence...

(We hear nothing at all.)

And that is just one of the eleven types of silence we have – office silence, desert silence, silence in a theatre...

(She plays the 'silence' which is interrupted by a cough.)

...typical! And at the other end of the audiological spectrum we have explosions. From small to large, from civilian to military, from a domestic boiler to an Atom bomb. They are all here neatly catalogued and filed. We've provided the effects for thousands and of radio shows broadcasting across the world, and we have had very very few complaints.

(Enter **SPIKE** *with an acetate record.)*

SPIKE. I would like to complain.

JANET. Not again Mr. Milligan. What is it this time?

SPIKE. This explosion – it's not loud enough...

JANET. It is **pretty** loud Mr Milligan.

SPIKE. No, no – it's got to be much **much** louder – this sounds like a bloody raspberry!

JANET. It's Disc 17, Side A track 8 – Explosions, heavy, mortar.

*(***JANET** *shows him the LP record from which the sound effect is taken. A* **BBC EXECUTIVE** *appears.)*

BBC EXECUTIVE. What appears to be the problem?

JANET. Mr Milligan is unhappy with the sound of the bomb going off.

BBC EXECUTIVE. Well let's hear it.

(She plays the record with the bomb effect. It is quite loud. They both jump. **SPIKE** *remains unmoved.)*

SPIKE. Whoever thinks that sounds like a mortar must be deaf.

JANET. Possibly from listening to it.

SPIKE. I am telling you that is not a mortar bomb. I **do** know what I'm talking about!

Scene Two

(The lights suddenly change and we hear a soundscape of gunfire. The **BBC EXECUTIVE** *puts on an army cap to become* **MAJOR JENKINS** *and* **SPIKE** *puts on a tin helmet to become his former self. We are suddenly back in Italy in 1944.)*

MAJOR JENKINS. Bombardier Milligan – make yourself useful.

SPIKE. Sir!

MAJOR JENKINS. We need to get fresh batteries and a twenty two radio set up to the observation post.

SPIKE. Where exactly sir?

MAJOR JENKINS. OP 1 is straight up there beyond the burnt out Sherman tank.

(He points up the hill.)

SPIKE. Right away Sir. Is it always this quiet?

MAJOR JENKINS. Welcome to Monte Cassino.

SPIKE. You're welcome to it too.

MAJOR JENKINS. Put a sock in it Milligan and get on with it.

SPIKE. *(To* **SOLDIERS**.*)* Ballard, Birch, you're coming with me.

*(***TWO SOLDIERS** *in tin hats appear.)*

BALLARD. Why?

SPIKE. You just volunteered.

BIRCH. Where are we going?

*(***SPIKE** *consults map.)*

SPIKE. Apparently World War Two is that way

*(***SPIKE** *points up the hill.)*

We will go up the stone-lined gully.

When it ends we start climbing the hill – you can see it's all terraced for olive trees. And if they start mortaring don't get stuck in the bloody gully or you'll get yourself killed… which is against regulations.

*(***BALLARD** *and* **BIRCH** *smile.* **SPIKE** *and the two soldiers start inching up the hillside. We hear a small mortar. Then more shells exploding.)*

BALLARD. They've seen us!

SPIKE. And I don't think they like us.

(Another explosion.)

BIRCH. We're sitting ducks.

SPIKE. I hope we're insured.

(Another mortar explodes much closer to them.)

Get down!

(They lie flat on the ground. **SPIKE** *fumbles for a woodbine.)*

I'm dying…

BIRCH. What?

SPIKE. …for a fag!

(Suddenly there is a whizz and an enormous bang right on top of them. Blackout.)

Scene Three

(A **BBC ANNOUNCER** *appears behind a large microphone, wearing a black tie and dinner jacket.)*

ANNOUNCER. This is the BBC, but that's not my fault.

You're listening to the steam driven, technicolour *Goon Show*!

(We hear Goon show theme and three performers take the stage.)

Mr Harry Secombe! Comic and tenor, but a fiver will do.

*(***SECOMBE** *is rotund, and sports a small bow tie. He comes on stage with a leek, as if it were a cigar and blows a raspberry.)*

Mr Peter Sellers, the man of many voices.

(Bespectacled **SELLERS** *comes on stage. We hear a sound effect of a huge crowd going wild and then cut off suddenly.)*

And least but not last, Mr Spike Milligan!

(Sound effect of a drum roll. **SPIKE** *walks on backwards, facing the wrong way and bows to the back of the stage. Then turns round.)*

And this week's episode is entitled… 'We don't appear to have a title Denis'.

SECOMBE. Good title!

(Enter **PRODUCER, DENIS MAIN-WILSON.***)*

MAIN-WILSON. Is it too much to ask for a title?

SPIKE. You've got a title. Producer. Isn't that good enough?

SELLERS. How about Esteemed Producer?

MAIN-WILSON. A steamed up producer might be more accurate.

SPIKE. *(Smiles and puts on a silly voice.)* I write the jokes Denis.

MAIN-WILSON. Really? That's very reassuring. Then perhaps you could get on and finish the script? By this evening would be good. Because that's when the recording is.

SPIKE. Don't worry Denis, it's all up here!

(Points to his head.)

MAIN-WILSON. It would be quite nice if it were down here.

(Points to script.)

SPIKE. I've had an idea…

MAIN-WILSON. Good.

SPIKE. Let's go to the pub!

Scene Four

(We are in Grafton's Pub. **SPIKE**, **SECOMBE** *and* **SELLERS** *are having a noisy drinking/ideas session. The atmosphere is chaotic but convivial – the banter is vaguely logical and competitive. Old friends relaxed in each other's company, trying voices, characters. A lot of smoking.)*

SELLERS. *(To* **SECOMBE**.*)* Your round Mr. Seagoon.

SECOMBE. How dare you. I am not round. I am just well-built. I have a fuller figure.

SPIKE. It's fuller batter pudding.

*(***SELLERS** *wears a flash suit and adopts a posh voice.)*

SELLERS. I would buy a drink but I don't appear to have any money I'm frightfully sorry.

SECOMBE. You're not sorry.

SELLERS. You're right. I'm not sorry at all, I'm glad do you hear me? I'm Glad!

SPIKE. You're not Glad. She works in Lyons Corner House – you're an impostor. Police! Arrest this man!

SELLERS. You'll never take me alive.

(He mimes putting a gun to his head.)

SPIKE. Don't do it!

SELLERS. All right I won't. Largely because my fingers aren't loaded.

SPIKE. If you're trying to make fools of the police you're too late! They were fools long before you got here. Hang on while I write that down…

(He scribbles a joke down on the back of a beer mat. **BARMAID** *interrupts.)*

BARMAID. Is anyone actually going to buy a drink?

SECOMBE. Well if you insist, sir, I'll have a pint of your finest brandy...

(Enter **MAIN-WILSON** *looking distraught.)*

MAIN-WILSON. Look is there **any** sign of a finished script?

SPIKE. It's the man from the BBC! You're just in time!

MAIN-WILSON. For what?

SPIKE. For your arrival.

MAIN-WILSON. Do you know what the time is?

SPIKE. Yes, I've got it written on this piece of paper.

MAIN-WILSON. What?

SPIKE. If anybody asks me the time, I can show it to them.

*(***SPIKE** *takes a piece of paper out of his pocket and shows it to* **MAIN-WILSON**.*)*

MAIN-WILSON. But it says here that it's eight o'clock.

SPIKE. That's right when I wrote it down, it was eight o'clock.

MAIN-WILSON. Hang on. Supposing when somebody asks you the time, it isn't eight o'clock?

SPIKE. Then I don't show it to them.

MAIN-WILSON. Well how do you know when it's eight o'clock?

SPIKE. I've got it written down on a piece of paper!

MAIN-WILSON. Very funny Spike. But in actual fact it's half past five and the show starts at seven.

*(**SELLERS** picks up the piece of paper.)*

SELLERS. *(Cockney geezer voice.)* You've been ripped off guv! This piece of paper isn't working.

*(**SPIKE** holds it to his ear and listens to it.)*

SPIKE. You're right! It's stopped! At precisely eight o'clock!

*(**MAIN-WILSON** is amused, but exasperated.)*

MAIN-WILSON. Spike, you have GOT to be more punctual!

SPIKE. Don't worry. I'm getting one of those new things that my Grandad has. It wakes you up at eight o'clock, boils the kettle, and pours a cup of tea.

MAIN-WILSON. You mean a teasmaid?

SPIKE. No, my Grandma.

*(All cheer. **MAIN-WILSON** tries to maintain control. **SPIKE** is scribbling the jokes down on a scrap of paper.)*

MAIN-WILSON. Come on boys, we can't afford to upset the BBC.

SELLERS. You would say that – you're wearing a BBC suit.

SECOMBE. How can you tell?

SELLERS. Small checks.

MAIN-WILSON. *(Wearily.)* All right, I'll get the drinks.

*(**SECOMBE** blows a raspberry.)*

Scene Five

(A **BBC** *office. We see a* **BBC EXECUTIVE** *with a moustache, pipe and blazer sitting behind a desk. He is fiddling with a phone system he cannot work.)*

BBC EXECUTIVE. Sorry I lost you – is that the switchboard? No? Who am I talking to? The shipping forecast… how did that happen?

(He notices **MAIN-WILSON**.*)*

Sorry Denis. Trying to get us a cup of tea. Having a problem getting to grips with this new-fangled gizmo…

*(***BBC EXECUTIVE** *gives up with the telephone and goes to the door and shouts.)*

Three teas please Miss er…

*(***MAIN-WILSON** *has clearly been hauled up in front of the* **BBC EXECUTIVE** *and the tone is headmasterly.)*

MAIN-WILSON. Two actually. Spike says he's going to be a bit late

BBC EXECUTIVE. Well what a surprise. Now look here Denis. I've had a series of complaints from the Sound Effects wallahs about your man Milligan. Not to put too fine a point on it, he is becoming a pain in the proverbial.

MAIN-WILSON. Spike is a perfectionist. He's trying to do something new in comedy.

BBC EXECUTIVE. Oh dear. I hope you are doing your best to discourage him. What the listeners want to hear is something familiar. Like Educating Archie?

MAIN-WILSON. The ventriloquist act?

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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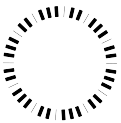

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