



Big Screen Classics

A Fish Called Wanda

A Fish Called Wanda

Directed by: Charles Crichton
©/Presented by:
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures Inc
Production Company: Prominent Features
Executive Producers: Steve Abbott, John Cleese
Produced by: Michael Shamberg
Associate Producer: John Comfort
Production Co-ordinator: Janine Lodge
Production Accountant: Andy Birmingham
Assistant Accountant: Yvonne Heeks
Financial Controller: Ian Miles
Location Manager: William Lang
Location Manager (Oxford): Nick Daubeny
Assistant Location Manager (London):
Chris Knowles
Production Assistants: Ralph Kamp, Liz Lehmanns
Assistant to Dr Cleese: Sophie Clarke-Jervoise
Producer's Assistant Alexandra Stone
Assistant to Mr Shamberg (US): Peter Byck
Assistant Director: Jonathan Benson
2nd Assistant Director: Melvin Lind
3rd Assistant Director: David Skynner
Continuity: Diana Dill
Casting Director: Priscilla John
Written by: John Cleese
Story by: John Cleese, Charles Crichton
Director of Photography: Alan Hume
Camera Operator: Neil Birney
Focus Puller: Simon Hume
Clapper Loader: Graham Hall
Gaffer: Bobby Bremner
Best Boy: Bill Thornhill
Grip: Jimmy Waters
Stills Photographer: David James
Special Effects Supervisor: George Gibbs
Special Effects Technician: Dave Watson
Film Editor: John Jymson
Assistant Film Editor: William Webb
Production Designer: Roger Murray-Leach
Art Director: John Wood
Assistant Art Director: Kevin Phipps
Set Decorator: Stephanie McMillan
Property Master: Bruce Bigg
Standby Property Supervisor: Alfie Smith
Standby Propman: Mickey Swift
Production Buyer: Brian Read
Construction Manager: Roy Evans
Head of Construction: Leon Apsey
Costume Designer: Hazel Pethig
Wardrobe Master: Ray Usher
Wardrobe Assistants: Steve Cornish,
Jenny Hawkins
Make-up Supervisor: Paul Engelen
Make-up Artist: Lynda Armstrong-Lawlor
Chief Hairdresser: Barry Richardson
Titles by: Plume Design
Title Sequence by: Damson Studios
Music by: John Du Prez
Guitar Soloist: John Williams
Music Producer: André Jacquemin
Music Editor: Peter Holt
Orchestral Recording: Dick Lewzey
Sound Recordist: Chris Munro
Boom Operator: Colin Wood
Sound Maintenance Engineer: Andrew Sissons
Re-recording Mixer: Gerry Humphreys
Sound Editor: Jonathan Bates
Stunt Co-ordinator: Romo Gorrara
Legal Adviser: Robert Conway
Animal Supplied by: Pauline Clift
Fish by: Wet Pets

John Cleese on 'A Fish Called Wanda' and director Charles Crichton

In the late 1960s, Graham Chapman and I wrote a script for David Frost. It was about a small firm of private detectives and was called *Pig Lust and Company*, with Pig Lust being played by Ronnie Barker. I asked Denis Norden to direct it. He said no. I asked Jay Lewis, who'd done *The Baby and the Battleship*. After my first phone call, he had a heart attack and died. Then someone suggested that Graham and I should meet with Charles Crichton. This would have been around 1968. We started working on the script and were knocked out by him. We realised that we were working with someone on a different plane from anyone we had encountered before.

Charlie started out as a cutter in 1932. He always used to announce proudly that it was before Hitler came to power – I never quite saw what the connection was. Even after he became a director he still operated as a cutter at Ealing sometimes. When Sandy Mackendrick made *Whisky Galore!* the Ealing people thought they had a disaster on their hands. Charlie asked to have a couple of weeks with it. He started playing around with it and when they saw his cut they realised they had a hit. At Ealing everyone was paid the same as a well-paid bank manager – decent middle-class money, but not the sort of payments you associate with the modern film world.

A very strange thing happened with *Pig Lust*. Frost sold the script to Ned Sherrin, who had made a series of not very successful, rather crude comedies. For some reason that Graham and I could never understand, Sherrin refused to use Charlie. The film got made but the title was changed to *Rentadick*. I remember Alexander Walker calling it 'a coffin in the nail of the British film industry' – that's the only time I have ever enjoyed a bad review. The whole thing had been woefully mishandled, but I said to Charlie, one day we will do something together. Then Python happened.

In the 1970s we began making Video Arts training films and Charlie started directing those. We did about eight together. Charlie was great, better than anyone I'd ever come across with a camera. He had an extraordinary economy too, because he always knew how he was going to cut the material. By the time we shot *A Fish Called Wanda* we were finishing every day at 6pm or 6.30pm, which is unheard of.

We made *Wanda* with MGM. I don't think we ever thought that we'd be able to raise the money in England. I went to David Putnam, but he said that he didn't want to work with Charlie. I really don't know why not. I think Charlie may have had a reputation as a bit of a drinker at one point, but it was misplaced. He did drink in the evening, but he never had a drink until he had finished work. We went round pitching the film to the various studios and only MGM were interested. Warners and Disney said it was too British. We approached Dino De Laurentiis, who seemed interested but then called two days later to say his daughter had read it and didn't like it. MGM were scared about Charlie but I said I would co-direct. After we finished shooting, I took my name off the credits.

When Kevin Kline and Jamie Lee Curtis first heard Charlie's muttering and saw the way he poked everything with a walking stick, they thought I had landed

Unit Publicist Bill Edwards
Studio: Twickenham Film Studios
Cast:

John Cleese (*Archie Leach*)
Jamie Lee Curtis (*Wanda Gerschwitz*)
Kevin Kline (*Otto*)
Michael Palin (*Ken*)
Maria Aitken (*Wendy Leach*)
Tom Georgeson (*George*)
Patricia Hayes (*Mrs Coady*)
Geoffrey Palmer (*Judge*)
Cynthia Caylor (*Portia*)
Mark Elwes (*customer in jeweller's shop*)
Neville Phillips (*manager of jeweller's shop*)
Peter Jonfield (*Inspector Marvin*)
Ken Campbell (*Bartlett*)
Al Ashton (*warder*)
Roger Hume (*locksmith*)
Roger Brierley (*Davidson*)
Llewellyn Rees (*Sir John*)
Michael Percival (*Percival*)
Kate Lansbury (*magistrate*)
Robert Cavendish (*copper*)
Andrew MacLachlan (*Zebedee*)
Roland MacLeod (*vicar*)
Jeremy Child (*Mr Johnson*)
Pamela Miles (*Mrs Johnson*)
Tom Piggot Smith (*13-year old Johnson child*)
Katherine John (*10-year old Johnson child*)
Sophie Johnstone (*8-year old Johnson child*)
Kim Barclay (*nanny*)
Sharon Twomey
(*1st junior barrister, defence counsel*)
Patrick Newman
(*2nd junior barrister, defence counsel*)
David Simeon (*clerk of court, Old Bailey*)
Imogen Bickford-Smith (*stenographer*)
Tia Lee (*junior barrister, prosecution counsel*)
Robert Putt (*police officer, Old Bailey*)
Waydon Croft (*1st prison officer*)
John Dixon (*2nd prison officer*)
Anthony Pedley (*irate driver*)
Robert McBain (*hotel clerk*)
Clare McIntyre (*airline employee*)
Charu Bala Chokshi (*Indian cleaner*)
Stephen Fry (*Hutchison*)
USA-UK 1988©
108 mins
Digital

The screening on Wed 4 Feb will be introduced by
Josh Glenn, BFI Production Coordinator

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them in some bizarre situation from which they were not going to emerge with their reputations intact. But after two or three days, they realised he knew exactly what he was doing.

Charlie and I worked out the story, then I went away and put the finishing touches to it. I very much wanted to work with Kevin Kline because I thought he was a great over-actor but I never thought of using an American for the Wanda role until my daughter Cynthia took me to see *Trading Places*. Everyone in England could see exactly why I had chosen Jamie Lee Curtis but nobody in America could – she had this reputation as a ‘scream queen’.

We were all very pleased with how *A Fish Called Wanda* turned out. I had made sure that there was nothing in the movie that couldn’t be understood by an American. *The New York Times* hated it, but a lot of critics’ opinions are irrational. One doesn’t take it seriously except for the effect it has on audiences. In New York, it had a major effect and none of the magazines wanted to do interviews with us. They saw *Wanda* as an obscure little film of no interest to their readers. But we platformed it, opening it in two cinemas in New York and one in LA. That allowed the buzz to build and soon the magazines were ringing back saying can we have that interview after all. It took about six weeks in America before we felt it was a hit. It succeeded almost everywhere, except Portugal and Japan (perhaps because of their attachment to fish).

We started doing the awards circuit. People used to say about going to orgies that if you went once you were a philosopher and if you went twice you were a pervert. That’s how I felt about awards ceremonies. Charlie had a great time though. He waved his stick at everyone. After that, he bought a place in Scotland with some of the money. He got offered one or two movies but he wasn’t very keen. He was in his late 70s by then. If I had got on with it and made *Fierce Creatures* a little earlier, Charlie would have been able to do that too, and it would have been a lot better as a result. He was a Rolls-Royce of a director.

John Cleese interviewed by Geoffrey Macnab, *Sight and Sound*, March 2003