

# TV Sunday

# 'Frankly, I need the money'

Cleese spends half his day writing long letters trying to politely say no to charities.

Because John Cleese is famous doesn't mean he's rich (and don't mention the two ex-wives)

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**M**ONEY. That's why the obsessive John Cleese is guest starring in a new ABC sitcom "Wednesdays at 9:30 (8:30 Central)."

He famously took more than five years to craft just 12 episodes of "Fawlty Towers" in the 70s. He won't step onto a movie set without the assurance that he can rewrite any dialogue that isn't up to snuff. And he hasn't written anything in three or four years that's he satisfied with.

So why give up control and enter the whirlwind pace of American television? Money.

"Well, it's these divorces," says Cleese, who is on roughly his third marriage and recently bought a gorgeous ranch in Montecito, California a seven-minute drive from his beach front home.

"There's that and there's

also the fact that I have a number of assistants and secretaries and naturally there has to be a ranch manager and you find you need to have two assistants for him. So there are plenty of salaries to be paid."

Though Cleese has a side career making instructional videos telling businessmen how to manage their time, he feels a bit overwhelmed.

He spends half his day writing long letters trying to politely say no to charities and the other half talking about work he did more than 30 years ago, i.e. "Monty Python" and "Fawlty."

And like any actor with two ex-wives, two daughters and a ranch to run, he's busy looking for the next job.

"Although I've got a bit salted away, I still need to earn at the moment," says the towering 62-year-old.

But surely those endless

runs of his classic British shows turn a pretty penny?

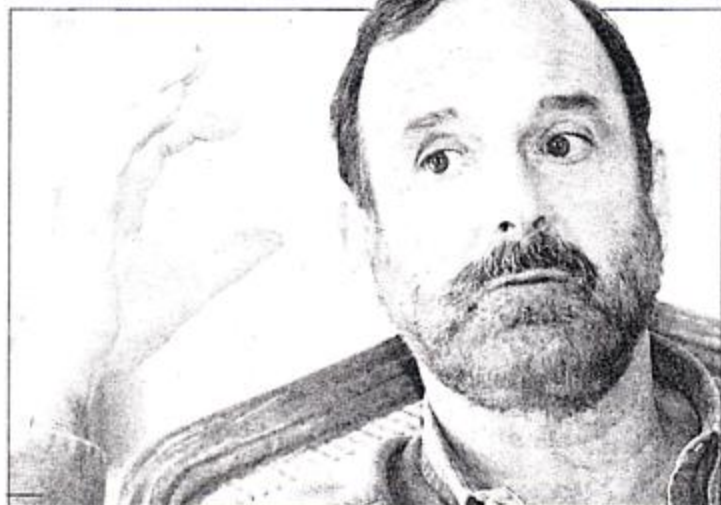
"One of the problems was that the work I did was for the BBC," says Cleese. "It sounds like a joke — and in a way it is. But it's also true."

"When I was doing 'Monty Python' in the mid-'60s, I once told an English friend working in American television what I got paid per episode and he laughed so much he fell off the sofa. I used to get 240 pounds [about \$360] an episode."

"When I was doing 'Fawlty Towers,' for the first series — that was writing and performing — I got 6,000 pounds."

"Most of the royalties are calculated to some extent on some of those original fees."

Cleese's own pilot about a law firm didn't fly last season, which was a bit of a relief since a TV show can be all-consuming and



the pace of American TV might drive him insane.

Even playing a reoccurring guest spot on someone else's show — in this case, as the media-mad Australian businessman who will do anything to see his new network get ratings — seemed a bit much for Cleese.

But he took a chance on creator Peter Tolan ("The Larry Sanders Show," "The Job") and a work schedule that would make Marlon Brando envious.

"When I was offered this show, I said I don't want it to take over my life," says Cleese. "They gave me a wonderful deal in which it takes me 2½ days a week to be in a show. I took a little bit of a risk and trusted him. He's come up with some really good scripts."