

Jam against Words

an ultrashort but gripping play by Venugopalan Ittekot

as staged in 2018 on the occasion of Cabbagcon v, the fifth Dutch Discworld Con, celebrating
35 years of Discworld by the late Sir Terry Pratchett

(Venugopalan Ittekot is a threefold personality, responsible for the
Dutch Discworld translations)

The episode enacted in this play is a typical Discworld event. It does *not* take place in Ankh-Morpork, although that bustling city is a veritable example of *complexity*, and complexity is the issue here. However, the upcoming dialogue is of a type that we traditionally encounter in remote and somewhat desolate areas, like deserts and steep mountains.

Characters:

Narrator, an Ankh-Morporkian storyteller

Jam the Eternally Confused, founder of the Order of Complexity Monks

Puddle, pupil of Jam, a novice Complexity Monk

Cast:

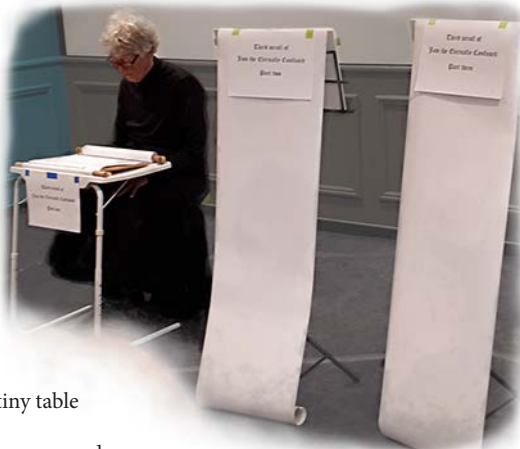
Narrator Venugopalan Ittekot 2 (Mieke Groot)

Jam Venugopalan Ittekot 1 (Ruurd Groot)

Puddle Venugopalan Ittekot 3 (Jur Groot)

Stage setting and general directions:

There is no curtain. When the audience fills the hall, Narrator already faces the audience from behind a tiny table on which is a scroll, visibly bearing the text: “Third Scroll of Jam the Eternally Confused part one”. Narrator is dressed completely in black, with a long skirt, but no hat. Initially she doesn’t stir and she seems to be unaware of the audience when it enters; all of her attention seems to be restricted to the scroll in front of her.



Narrator at her tiny table

To the right of Narrator's table are two music stands, both mostly hidden behind two unrolled scrolls, bearing the text "Third Scroll of Jam the Eternally Confused", followed by "part two" and "part three" respectively.

Jam and Puddle do not appear on stage until Narrator has started her story. When they appear, Jam is dressed in an ochre Tibetan monk's habit and a yellow cap-like Tibetan monk's hat; he also has a shoulder bag and a colourful broom. Puddle wears a grey Tibetan monk's habit, with a pinkish-purple Peruvian crocheted bonnet and a yellow shawl.

As soon as the audience has gone quiet, the play is briefly introduced by a member of the Cabbagecon organisation. When the introducer goes off stage, Narrator comes alive, lifts the scroll and starts reading it aloud, unwinding the scroll and thereby causing more and more of it to hang over the table.

Narrator

It's weird, but as already established in the oldest Discworld scripture, *The Colour of Magic*, the Discworld's magic is founded on the Law of Conservation of Reality – but what do we mean by that word – *reality*? What follows may enlighten us a bit. — Or possibly not...

Now, let us imagine: we are in a green place at the edge of a desert. The weather is pleasant, the cherry trees are blossoming along the riverbank. A flock of doves is coming from the mountain and passing over the stream. From a distance, two figures are approaching.

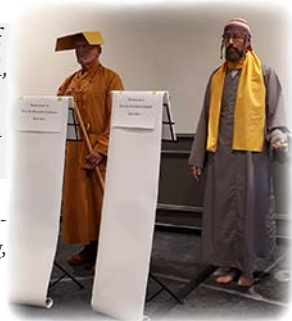


On these words Jam and Puddle turn up from the left and slowly pass behind Narrator to take up position behind their music stands. While he walks, Jam is sweeping with his broom. On reaching their position, Jam and Puddle freeze, although Puddle's hand keeps on fiddling with something.

We'll recognize *Jam* the Eternally Confused, founder of the Order of Complexity Monks – and *Puddle*, his pupil, a novice Complexity Monk.

As we'll notice, Puddle is absent-mindedly toying with a pebble.

Narrator freezes, Jam and Puddle come alive. Puddle's conduct is rather jolly and offhand, bordering on the scoffing, but gradually he'll subside a bit.



Puddle

Look at all those people sitting there – I *can* say it like that, can't I?

Jam's pontificating is loud and solemn; it sounds relentless and inexorable, but also resigned.

Jam

What you're saying is only a description
Descriptions describe what *happens* and *is*
By means of *words*
And please, don't mistake words for the real, as some people do

All the while, Puddle keeps on fondling his pebble.

Puddle

Is what I'm saying not real then?

Meanwhile, Jam has been tying the broomstick to the shoulder bag, to facilitate his gesturing.

Jam

It's real as language, but language is only talk
Words come out in a single line, one after another
Even when we write them

Puddle

But these folk *are* there now, aren't they?

Jam

You *say* it
What we say or write always has a beginning
– And it ends
People even have a special symbol to put there

Puddle

Ah, a period... And reality isn't like that?

Jam

You may believe the sitting to be a finite matter, with a beginning and an end
But these people existed before and will persist ... I *think*
Reality is not just somewhere and somewhen

Jam and Puddle freeze, Narrator comes alive.

Narrator

A cloud casts a shadow over the scene and disappears again. Some cherry trees wander off... In the distance, out of the desert, a train comes into view, bumping into first one, then another cherry tree. Finally it comes to a stop and unloads a large jar of cherry jam. Even Puddle, jam fancier though he is, pays no attention to this. For the moment, all seems quiet along the river.

Narrator freezes, Jam and Puddle come alive.

Jam

When anything happens anywhen and anywhere
It's like when a pebble drops in a pond
With waves of causality spreading around

Puddle

In a pond? *That's all?*

Jam

This pond is endless in all directions and it isn't flat
Wherever and whenever the waves hit a place or a
moment in time
Again it's like new pebbles drop

Puddle

All with their waves spreading, you mean? Always
expanding?

Jam

Yes and no – they spread and keep on spreading
All around – but *they also reflect*, turning *back* again
The world is so large, and time so long, you can't possibly predict where waves
will go
Where a pebble may travel
And when it may return

Jam and Puddle freeze, Narrator comes alive.

Narrator

Years before, on the horizon a bank was built. Now, members of the Money Guild are jumping off it. Nobody seems to care, but somewhere else a hungry lonesome cowboy starts writing a poem about it. The elephants mentioned before are getting restless as it dawns on them that things are getting a bit complicated. Meanwhile the cowboy-poet is voraciously spooning jam from the jar.



Narrator freezes, Jam and Puddle come alive.

Jam

Pebbles and waves, they are not really that different
Always meeting one another
Changing each other
In everlasting complexity – too complex to describe

Puddle

But all those people sitting there – to *me* it's OK to use that as a description.

Jam

A description, a subjective *presentation* of matters
Descriptions try to describe what *happened* and *was*
With separate *words*, like *things* and the *world* –
And ignorant people may treat these words as the real thing

Puddle

Ah, I get it. You mean what I *say* isn't really real. Not as real as what I'm trying to *describe*. There's always more to it, you mean.

Jam

It's real language, but language is only talk, and talk is a narrow road
Words coming out in a single file, one after another
When we write them even more so
Words are not empty but they are *bare*

Jam and Puddle freeze, Narrator comes alive. While Narrator speaks, Jam and Puddle adjust their scrolls, moving mechanically.

Narrator

By now, the bank building is completely evacuated. A loud wailing arises because the doves have discovered their bikes have been stolen by the fleeing bankers. The theatre tickets that have been sold to the dwarves are suddenly revealed as being fakes; the dwarves are very angry indeed and start demolishing the Actors' Guild House. Things are getting out of hand and it might be better for Puddle to warn the City Watch before the train too gets involved.

Narrator freezes, Jam and Puddle come alive.

Puddle

These folk being *here* now is too bare as a description – too small, too short for comfort?

Jam

Too singular, too cut loose from the rest – it has to be boundless and continuous
Also – what we say or write always has a beginning
And soon it ends
People even have a special concept for something like that

Puddle

A period, yes —but haven't we been here before?

Jam

Not here
Not the same
All is changed

Puddle

A bit different, yes. It's a few minutes later, to begin with. But the situation remains the same. OK, if you insist: it's *complex*, but just as complex as before.

Jam

Not as before
It's a very *different* complexity now
Complexity is too complex to describe
Its structure has no recipe

Puddle

Come on, the sitting of those people there – surely *that* can't be all that complex? Look at it: just people, sitting on chairs; that description fits the fact.

Jam

In your words them sitting there is like a frozen moment
But some of them must be fidgeting or scratching their ah... arms
If only from having to sit and listen to this

Puddle considers this for a moment.

Puddle

Aha: and getting annoyed – so the audience is *influenced* by us... mmm...

Puddle's hand opens and moves to his chin. Then Jam and Puddle freeze, and Narrator comes alive.



Narrator

As some of you may have noticed, Puddle accidentally dropped the pebble from his hand when his posture changed into thinking mode.

Narrator freezes momentarily, Puddle comes alive.

Puddle

But then – wait a minute, I’m thinking – the audience and everything must also have its influence on me ..?

Jam and Puddle freeze, Narrator comes alive. When Narrator next recites “innumerable changes”, Jam unties his broom and hands it over to Puddle, both moving a bit mechanically.

Narrator

The moment Puddle’s pebble touched the ground, its causal waves started expanding, bringing innumerable changes. Jam jars fall over and are running empty. Disgruntled elephants depart for the mountains. Dwarves are taking over the building evacuated by the bankers, intending to refurbish it for use as their own theatre. A wealthy pigeon fancier is so kind as to provide all aggrieved doves with an electrically assisted bicycle.

Narrator freezes, Jam and Puddle come alive.

Jam

All that is or happens is an influence on everything
Reality is constantly bombarding itself
with waves of change spreading around

Puddle

But what about my free will? Surely I *must* have a free will. We *all* have a free will.

Jam

As Sho Pen Hao already wrote, that claim leads to a dead end
When you say that *you* are someone who *has* a free will
Then you-the-someone is something *distinct* from this will
Now — let’s assume that there’s something like a will in you
Then if that will is *truly* free, you have no say over it *whatsoever*

Puddle

Hang on – *wait a minute!* So I don’t matter?



Jam

You *do*, you are a pebble and a *complex* pebble
When influences touch you, you are changed
But in a way seriously determined by how you were before

Puddle

Me? I'm just a pebble? That doesn't sound overly complex, does it?

Jam

Well, not just a pebble but a pebble full of many pebbles
That influence and change each other
According to their previous states
Combined with the waves from elsewhere

Puddle

Seems to me I'm more of a pond than just a pebble.

This proposition seems to add to Jam's already considerable confusion.

Jam

That's as fitting a description as any
But –

Jam and Puddle unexpectedly freeze; it takes a few moments before Narrator realizes it's her turn, but then she comes alive. During Narrator's next words Jam and Puddle gradually wilt and almost collapse.

Narrator

While reality keeps on metamorphosing endlessly, the exchange of words continues and doesn't seem to get *anywhere*. Although Puddle gradually approaches enlightenment – *very gradually, alas* – we seem to be getting further and further away from it. The tableau with Jam and Puddle, which is happening somewhere on the rim of one of the Seven Deserts, dwindles in the distance. We are adrift between the complex bargainings of the stars and have lost sight of the Disc.



While Narrator now freezes and wilts like Jam and Puddle did, a member of the Cabbage-con organisation takes the stage and concludes the event with an encouraging epilogue:

After this pretentious assault you now may well be just as confused as Jam. Later on, you might even get haunted by burning questions about what we've just witnessed. The collective personality of Venugopalan Ittekot has kindly agreed to answer any questions even remotely related to the subject of this performance. All answers will sincerely be intended to enlighten you. Of course, as you may already guess, some answers might result in even more confusion. Well, such is complexity.

As a last fling, the three characters magically change into stage hands; they start dismantling the props, completely ignoring the audience.



Stage hands dismantling the props

Questions and comments

Questions or comments can be submitted to: "Venugopalan Ittekot"
<vittekot@iwacc.com>

Q: Why does Jam wear some Tibetan head gear, while Puddle's hat is from Peru?

A: As most film buffs know, there is no real difference between the Himalayas and the Andes. This is proven by the fact that much of the footage of the film *Seven Years in Tibet* was actually filmed in the Andes. Shooting the film took only months, instead of the seven years as advertised; but this is an issue that belongs to the field of the History Monks.

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