



(/features/comedy\_chronicles/)

## Margaret Thatcher: sitcom star



Written by: [Graham McCann \(/people/graham\\_mccann/\)](/people/graham_mccann/)

[Margaret Thatcher \(/people/margaret\\_thatcher/\)](/people/margaret_thatcher/) was not known for her sense of humour. In fact, [Margaret Thatcher \(/people/margaret\\_thatcher/\)](/people/margaret_thatcher/) was known for her lack of a sense of humour.

There was, for example, the time in the late 1970s when, as Opposition Leader, she almost succeeded in censoring the one half-decent joke in a key campaign speech. Peter Jay, the son-in-law of the then-Prime Minister James Callaghan, had said that the so-called 'Sunny Jim' saw himself rather like Moses, leading his people after long travails into the Promised Land. It was a naïve thing to say, and the Conservative scribes duly pounced on it, writing a line for her party conference speech that said: 'My message to Moses is: "Keep taking the tablets!"'

The problem was that the Iron Lady had a tin ear for comic repartee: she not only failed to get the joke but also tried to change it to 'Keep taking the pills'. It was only after her exasperated advisors had repeatedly explained the gag to her that, rather reluctantly, she agreed to revert to the original version.

Then there was her infamous ignorance about [Monty Python \(/people/groups/monty-python/\)](/people/groups/monty-python/). In 1989 (</guide/year/1989/>), as part of the Liberal Party's rebranding exercise as the Liberal Democrats, they had adopted a bird ('the bird of liberty') as their logo. One of Thatcher's speechwriters, [John O'Sullivan \(/people/john\\_osullivan/\)](/people/john_osullivan/), upon seeing this, came up with the bright idea of invoking [Monty Python \(/people/groups/monty-python/\)](/people/groups/monty-python/)'s dead parrot sketch in order to mock it. Mrs Thatcher, however, had never seen the sketch and had never heard of [Monty Python \(/people/groups/monty-python/\)](/people/groups/monty-python/).

Her advisors rushed off to find a video so that she could become probably one of the last people in the country to see John Cleese (/people/john\_cleese/) berate Michael Palin (/people/michael\_palin/) about the dead bird with the beautiful plumage. She stared at it blank-faced, from start to finish, and, when it was over, she seemed none the wiser as to what it had all been about.

She agreed, nonetheless, to add the gag to her forthcoming speech at the Tory party conference. Just before she made her appearance, however, as she waited off stage for her cue, she turned to one of her young aides, John Whittingdale, and whispered to him, 'John, who is this Monty Python (/people/groups/monty-python/), and is he one of us?'

Whittingdale, slightly horrified by the very belated question but realising it was the wrong time for anything other than prompt positivity, answered: 'Yes ma'am, a great supporter!' She nodded, walked on to make her speech, delivered the 'dead parrot' lines ('I will say only this of the Liberal Democrat symbol and of the party it symbolises: This is an ex-parrot, it is not merely stunned. It has ceased to be, expired and gone to meet its maker. It is a parrot no more. It has rung down the curtain and joined the choir invisible. This is a late parrot! And now for something completely different...'), received huge applause, and still seemed somewhat puzzled as to why so many people were laughing.



A similar thing happened (also in 1989 (/guide/year/1989/)) when the Conservatives were due to hold a European election rally in Nottingham, with the actor John Barron (/people/john\_barron/) booked to introduce Thatcher on to the stage. In order to exploit his celebrity status as 'C.J.' from *The Fall And Rise Of Reginald Perrin* (/tv/fall\_and\_rise\_reginald\_perrin/) (in which his most-imitated catchphrase had been: 'I didn't get where I am today by...'), one of her speechwriters suggested weaving into her speech: 'To coin a phrase (with which Mr Barron - or should I say "CJ" - will be familiar): I didn't get where I am today by not fighting Britain's corner!'

The problem was that Thatcher had never even heard of the sitcom, let alone watched any episodes, and so the reference was utterly lost on her. After hearing the line, therefore, she responded by snapping testily, 'No, no, no - you've got to be *positive*!' Her suggested 'correction' therefore read: 'I got to where I am today by fighting for what I believe!' Once again, it took numerous patient attempts at explaining the significance of the original line before, still somewhat sceptically, she finally agreed to use it.

Her former driver, Denis Oliver, later confirmed that, for her, comedy simply did not compute: 'One thing she didn't have was a sense of humour. I don't think she knew what humour was. You'd try telling her a joke, usually a political one, but you'd get these questions at the end - "But why did he...?" - and it would kill the whole thing'.

She also seemed (as the woman who once said of her deputy, William Whitelaw: 'Every Prime Minister needs a Willie') to be totally deaf to all double-entendres, which always made her aides quite nervous as to what she would say next in the Commons during PMQs (when asked, for example, about pacifists distributing leaflets outside an army barracks, she replied, 'I'm sure soldiers will know exactly what they can do with those leaflets!' and then seemed confused by the laughter that followed), and they were even more anxious whenever she met members of the public.

When visiting a training centre in Putney, for example, she was introduced to an extremely large and muscular young man who was busy at work with a giant wrench. 'My goodness,' she exclaimed loudly, 'I've never seen a tool as big as that!'

There was more of the same when Michael Brunson, then-political editor of ITN (/pro/blackbook/companies/itn/), found her on the campaign trail wandering around in a high street hardware store. Clutching a Black and Decker drill in her hand, she looked around brightly and declared: 'This is the largest tool I have ever had in my hand!' The film crew collapsed, but she was merely bemused.

It happened again during her victory tour of the Falkland Islands. She was taken to inspect a very large and powerful field gun used there by the British military forces. The soldier manning it asked her if she would care to fire a round herself. 'But mightn't it jerk me off?' she replied. Chris Moncrieff, the political editor of the Press Association, who was covering the visit, duly recorded the desperate struggle of the soldier to keep a straight face.

A sitcom, therefore, seemed the last place to find Margaret Thatcher ([/people/margaret\\_thatcher/](/people/margaret_thatcher/)), but, amazingly enough, that is precisely where, on one memorable occasion, she expressly wanted to be. The sitcom in question was the only one that she really ever watched: [Yes Minister](/guide/group/yes_minister/) ([/guide/group/yes\\_minister/](/guide/group/yes_minister/)).



The show, ironically, had been delayed from reaching the screen back in 1979 (</guide/year/1979/>) because of her - or rather, the imminent General Election in which she was bidding to become the new Prime Minister. With James Callaghan's minority Labour Government clinging on precariously to power by its closely-bitten fingernails, an election seemed inevitable at some point in the weeks or months ahead, and so the BBC (</pro/blackbook/companies/bbc/>), being mindful of the convention that discouraged it during election campaigns from broadcasting anything politically controversial among its 'non-factual' output, promptly put production of the sitcom (which had already filmed the first episode and was about to shoot the rest) on hold. The show thus ended up stuck on the shelf until after May, when the Conservatives won the election and Thatcher did indeed become the first female PM.

As soon as the rest of the series had been filmed and the sitcom started being broadcast in February 1980 (</guide/year/1980/>), Margaret Thatcher ([/people/margaret\\_thatcher/](/people/margaret_thatcher/)) became one of its most ardent admirers. How much of the actual humour she got would remain a matter for conjecture, but she certainly recognised and relished the programme's mockery of pettifogging civil servants, excessive bureaucracy and political timidity. She seemed to regard it more as a documentary than a satire, often quoting it to support her own policies regarding streamlining administration and strengthening government.

In December 1982 (</guide/year/1982/>), she wrote to the BBC (</pro/blackbook/companies/bbc/>)'s Director-General, thanking him for sending her, as requested, tapes of the show for her and her family to watch over Christmas at Chequers. 'All are superb,' she said of the episodes.

When [Yes Minister](/guide/group/yes_minister/) appeared to have come to an end, therefore, after the second series was broadcast in 1982 ([1982](/guide/year/1982/)), she was quick to express her disappointment. 'I adored [Yes Minister](/guide/group/yes_minister/),' she told interviewers at the time. 'I thought it was marvellous - so true, some of them... Absolutely brilliant - descriptive - brilliantly cast.' She even sent a handwritten fan letter to the writers, saying: 'I love your programmes. Every one a winner. The dialogue, timing - superb. And the insight into the thought-processes of politicians and civil servants is supremely perceptive.'

The sitcom was not yet actually, in dead parrot parlance, 'bleedin' demised,' but neither was it merely resting. The writers, feeling under-appreciated, and under-paid, by the BBC ([BBC](/pro/blackbook/companies/bbc/)), were undecided as to the show's future. Talks had been opened about another series early in 1983 ([1983](/guide/year/1983/)), but had soon stalled over terms. 'We asked for a lot more money,' Jonathan Lynn ([Jonathan Lynn](/people/jonathan_lynn/)) would later reveal, and the BBC ([BBC](/pro/blackbook/companies/bbc/)) claimed it was unable to meet their demands.

The writers, as a consequence, simply got on with other projects, as did the actors, and the future of the show was left in limbo. Something very unexpected happened, however, at the beginning of the following year that would suddenly bring [Yes Minister](/guide/group/yes_minister/) right back into the forefront of the public consciousness. Its most powerful fan demanded that it return.

The cue came in December of 1983 ([1983](/guide/year/1983/)) courtesy of [Mary Whitehouse](/people/mary_whitehouse/), when her noisy mouthpiece, The National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, announced its intention to honour [Yes Minister](/guide/group/yes_minister/) at its annual awards ceremony for exemplifying 'wholesome television' (a previous recipient had been *Jim'll Fix It*). As if this was not a big enough 'treat' in itself, Whitehouse also took it upon herself to invite none other than the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher ([Margaret Thatcher](/people/margaret_thatcher/)), to present the award to the team. (There is no doubt that Whitehouse, as a staunch Tory, saw the party political capital to be generated from such an event, as her letter assured the Prime Minister that, while she would not be required to make a formal speech, 'you would, needless to say, be more than welcome to use the occasion as you saw fit'.)





Inside Number 10, Thatcher accepted the invitation enthusiastically, and then discussed with her Press Officer, the beetle-browed and bear-like Bernard Ingham ([/people/bernard\\_ingham/](#)), how best to exploit the occasion. It was Ingham who hit upon the idea that she should perform a special Yes Minister ([/guide/group/yes\\_minister/](#)) sketch alongside Paul Eddington ([/people/paul\\_eddington/](#)) and Nigel Hawthorne ([/people/nigel\\_hawthorne/](#)) (Derek Fowlds ([/people/derek\\_fowlds/](#)) was on a provincial tour at the time in *The Norman Conquests* ([/fringe/2015/norman\\_conquests/](#)) and was thus deemed unavailable). Rather than ask Jay and Lynn to write it, however, Thatcher asked Ingham to conjure something up himself.

'I wrote the script,' he later confirmed. 'Number 10 honed it. We rehearsed it endlessly in Mrs Thatcher's study. She played herself, of course. Sir Robin Butler (her Principal Private Secretary) played Jim Hacker, not I fear to Mr Eddington's standards, and myself a pathetic Sir Humphrey. Mrs Thatcher was determined to get every inflection right. It was like writing a speech for her, an endless operation'. The aim, he would say, was 'to demonstrate that perhaps she was not devoid of a sense of humour after all'.

All of this was going on without either of the *real* writers, or any of the real actors, knowing anything about it. The first that Jay and Lynn knew of the award was a couple weeks before the event was due to happen. While neither of them was particularly pleased to hear that their show would be receiving the Mary Whitehouse stamp of approval, they thought it would be petty to protest, so they greeted the news as graciously as they could manage.

It was only a little later that they were informed that Margaret Thatcher ([/people/margaret\\_thatcher/](#)) was going to present the award, and that the ceremony would be broadcast live on BBC Radio 4 ([/guide/channel/radio4/](#))'s *The World At One* programme. Then, a mere two days before it was set to occur, the call came from Number 10 revealing to them that Thatcher would be joining Eddington and Hawthorne to perform a short sketch that, it was said, she had written.

Both writers were shocked. For Antony Jay (/people/antony\_jay/) it came as quite a pleasant surprise: 'I was delighted,' he later admitted. 'To actually get the accolade of the Prime Minister being keen enough on the programme to show the world that she would like to be in it! As far as I was concerned it kind of put the crown on the programme as far as public political acceptance was concerned.' Jonathan Lynn (/people/jonathan\_lynn/), in contrast, was horrified, regarding it as nothing more than a cynical PR stunt by Number 10's Press Office ('My first thought was: "What the hell is she doing writing sketches when she ought to be running the country - somewhat better than she's running it at the moment!"').



The two actors, who were the last of all to know, were even more alarmed and appalled. During the evening before the ceremony, Paul Eddington (/people/paul\_eddington/) was resting in his dressing room at the Albery Theatre, glancing through The Guardian, when he received a call from the BBC (/pro/blackbook/companies/bbc/) bearing the news that Mary Whitehouse (/people/mary\_whitehouse/) would not be presenting the award. Having been dreading being pictured with her in public, he sank back in his chair and breathed a huge sigh of relief. He was then told that Margaret Thatcher (/people/margaret\_thatcher/) would be doing it instead, causing him to leap up and gasp with distress. Then came the additional news that she would also be 'acting' alongside him and Nigel Hawthorne (/people/nigel\_hawthorne/).

He was now apoplectic. This, he shouted, was an outrage. This was going to turn a tribute to Yes Minister (/guide/group/yes\_minister/) into a cheap photo opportunity for Number 10. Worse still, after all of the efforts, over all of the years, to keep the sitcom clear of any connotations with any particular political party, here would be the Leader of the Conservative Party practically pinning a big blue rosette on the show.

He immediately picked up the telephone and called his co-star, who was relaxing that evening at his home at Burnt Farm Ride in Enfield, and spluttered his indignation at this cynical imposition, telling Hawthorne that, 'as a matter of principle,' he must refuse to do it. Hawthorne, however, though feeling

Similarly shocked and queasy about the imminent event (the news of which he had, at first, taken to be a hoax), understandably questioned why Eddington expected him to do the dirty work, and - in a classic bit of theatrical buck-pushing - suggested that it was really Eddington's responsibility to refuse as it was his name that came first in the credits.

Panicking, each man then called Jonathan Lynn (/people/jonathan\_lynn/), begging him to help extricate them from this embarrassment. Lynn, however, pointed out that neither he nor Jay had been consulted about any of this, and, as it was the actors who had been invited, it was up to the actors to say 'yea' or 'nay'.

Neither Eddington nor Hawthorne, when push came to shove, felt brave enough to publicly snub the Prime Minister, feeling that it would cause more trouble than it would be worth, and so, with great reluctance, they received their scripts the following morning, gazed aghast at the clumsy, tin-eared dialogue, bit their lips hard and then set off grimly to face their ordeal. 'A mixture of nervousness and vanity,' Eddington would say, 'eventually won the day.'

It was thus at lunchtime on Friday, 20 January 1984 (/guide/year/1984/), in the chilly crypt of All Souls Church in Langham Place, beside Broadcasting House, that Yes Minister (/guide/group/yes\_minister/) met the Prime Minister. Jay and Lynn joined Eddington and Hawthorne at the event, and it was immediately obvious, upon their arrival, how expertly Bernard Ingham (/people/bernard\_ingham/) had choreographed the whole occasion, timing it perfectly not only for live radio coverage but also for inclusion in London's Evening Standard, the forthcoming television news bulletins and the following morning's papers.

Inside, as an acutely awkward-looking Eddington and Hawthorne sat clutching their scripts on a couple of fold-up wooden chairs, Margaret Thatcher (/people/margaret\_thatcher/) (who by this time had rehearsed the sketch no fewer than twenty-three times with her staff, and had then gone over it once again in the car on the way to the location) made her rapid pigeon-toed way over to the assembled wall of lights, microphones and cameras and announced brightly that this was 'the world premiere of *Yes, Prime Minister*'. Then, taking her place beside the two actors on a small stage, the sketch commenced:



Margaret thatcher turns thespian with the cast of Yes...

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**THATCHER:** Ah, good morning Jim, Sir Humphrey. Do come in and sit down. How's your wife? Is she well?

**HACKER:** *[Puzzled]* Oh yes, fine, Prime Minister. Fine. Thank you. Yes, fine.

**THATCHER:** Good. So pleased. I've been meaning to have a word with you for some time. I've got an idea.

**HACKER:** *[Brightening visibly]* An idea, Prime Minister? Oh good.

**SIR HUMPHREY:** *[Guardedly]* An idea, Prime Minister?

**THATCHER:** Well, not really an idea. It's gone beyond that, actually. I've given it quite a bit of thought and I'm sure you, Jim, are the right man to carry it out. It's got to do with a kind of institution and you are sort of responsible for institutions, aren't you?

**SIR HUMPHREY:** *[Cautiously]* Institutions, Prime Minister?

**HACKER:** *[Decisively]* Oh yes, institutions fall to me. Most definitely. And you want me to set one up, I suppose?

**THATCHER:** Set one up? Certainly not! I want you to get rid of one.

**HACKER:** *[Astonished]* Get rid of one, Prime Minister?

**THATCHER:** Yes. It's all very simple. I want you to abolish economists.

**HACKER:** *[Mouth open]* Abolish economists, Prime Minister?

**THATCHER:** Yes, abolish economists. And quickly.

**SIR HUMPHREY:** *[Silkily]* All of them, Prime Minister?

**THATCHER:** Yes, all of them. They never agree on anything. They just fill the heads of politicians with all sorts of curious notions, like the more you spend, the richer you get.

**HACKER:** *[Coming around to the idea]* I see your point, Prime Minister. Can't have the nation's time wasted on curious notions, can we? No.

**SIR HUMPHREY:** *[Sternly]* Minister!

**THATCHER:** Quite right, Jim. Absolute waste of time. Simply got to go.

**HACKER:** *[Uncertain]* Simply got to go?

**THATCHER:** *[Motherly]* Yes Jim. Don't worry. If it all goes wrong I shall get the blame. But if it goes right - as it will - then you'll get the credit for re-deploying a lot of underused and misapplied resources. Probably get promotion, too.

**SIR HUMPHREY:** *[Indignantly]* Resources? 'Resources,' Prime Minister? We're talking about economists!

**THATCHER:** Were, Sir Humphrey. Were.

**HACKER:** *[Decisively]* Yes Humphrey, were. We're going to get rid of them.

**THATCHER:** Well, it's all settled, then. I'll look forward to receiving your plan for abolition soon. Tomorrow, shall we say? I'd like you to announce it before it all leaks.

**HACKER:** *[Brightly]* Tomorrow then, Prime Minister.

**THATCHER:** Yes. Well, go and sort it out. Now, Sir Humphrey ... what did you say your degree was?

(V) **SIR HUMPHREY:** *[Innocently]* Degree, Prime Minister?

**THATCHER:** *[Firmly]* Yes, Sir Humphrey, degree. Your degree. You have one, I take it - most Permanent Secretaries do, or perhaps two?

**SIR HUMPHREY:** *[Modestly]* Er, well actually, Prime Minister, a Double First.

**THATCHER:** Congratulations, Sir Humphrey, but what in?

**SIR HUMPHREY:** *[Weakly]* Politics... er ... and er... Economics.

**THATCHER:** *[Soothingly]* Capital, my dear Sir Humphrey, capital. You'll know exactly where to start!

**SIR HUMPHREY:** *[Bleakly]* Yes, Prime Minister.

*[Exit Jim Hacker and Sir Humphrey]*

More *Hi-de-Hayek* than Yes Minister ([/guide/group/yes\\_minister/](/guide/group/yes_minister/)), it was only comical in its awkwardness, with Thatcher, far from demonstrating a hitherto well-hidden sense of humour, actually looking and sounding more robotic than ever. So eerily reminiscent of Dame Edith Evans (</people/edith-evans/>) as Lady Bracknell that one half-expected her to screech 'A *handbag?*' at Hacker, she slowly over-enunciated her way through her lines while Eddington and Hawthorne, pale-faced and anxious, resembled hostages being forced to record an 'all's well' message to their families.

When it was over (with her barking out that 'It's about time we had a new Yes Minister ([/guide/group/yes\\_minister/](/guide/group/yes_minister/)) programme. After all, they earn money abroad, too!'), Thatcher acknowledged the forced applause, and then Jonathan Lynn ([/people/jonathan\\_lynn/](/people/jonathan_lynn/)) was presented with the award. Sensing that this was the only chance he and the team would have to leave a scratch or two on the Government's gleaming PR machine, he stepped up to the microphone and said: 'I'd like to thank Mrs Mary Whitehouse ([/people/mary\\_whitehouse/](/people/mary_whitehouse/)) for this award, and I should also like to thank Mrs Thatcher for finally taking her rightful place in the field of situation comedy.'

There followed, he would later say, 'a brief but audible gasp' from the assembled reporters, and then 'a volcanic eruption, one of the biggest laughs I ever got in my career'. There was only one person in the room who was not laughing. It was Margaret Thatcher ([/people/margaret\\_thatcher/](/people/margaret_thatcher/)).

The slight failed to spoil the stunt, as the subsequent coverage was more or less what Bernard Ingham ([/people/bernard\\_ingham/](/people/bernard_ingham/)) had expected: broad, fawning and favourable (it was even shown, in full, on that evening's TV news). It did, nonetheless, make the Yes Minister ([/guide/group/yes\\_minister/](/guide/group/yes_minister/)) team feel a little less aggrieved about having had to endure the whole sorry affair.



Eddington and Hawthorne were then teased remorselessly about their involvement by the otherwise engaged Derek Fowlds ([/people/derek\\_fowlds/](/people/derek_fowlds/)). 'I found it hilarious,' he later told me, 'because they were clearly so uncomfortable. They were both very left wing, so of course I called them up, shouting, "*Hypocrites! You two - acting with Maggie Thatcher? How dare you?*" I would have loved to have been there. I think Paul and Nigel missed me propping them up!'

What would come to seem most ironic about the experience was the fact that, as everyone reflected during the months that followed on what had happened with Thatcher, the sense of irritation that it engendered started to reignite the old passion for the show. Paul Eddington ([/people/paul\\_eddington/](/people/paul_eddington/)) summed up the feeling when he said: 'When we started, we set out to annoy absolutely everybody. Then Mrs Whitehouse gave us an award - presumably for the cleanest show on the air - and Mrs Thatcher insisted on making the presentation. So clearly we had failed.'

That feeling, that niggling sense of frustration, planted a seed. Fail again, fail better. Maybe they did have unfinished business, after all, with *Yes Minister* ([/guide/group/yes\\_minister/](/guide/group/yes_minister/)).

The BBC (</pro/blackbook/companies/bbc/>), greatly encouraged by all of the fresh media coverage, made Jay and Lynn a much-improved offer, for a Christmas special followed by two more series, and a new deal was duly agreed. *Yes Minister* ([/guide/group/yes\\_minister/](/guide/group/yes_minister/)) thus returned at the end of 1984 (</guide/year/1984/>) for the special, *Party Games* (which saw Jim Hacker finally shin his way up to the top of the greasy pole as the new PM), and *Yes, Prime Minister* ([/tv/yes\\_prime\\_minister/](/tv/yes_prime_minister/)) started its run at the beginning of 1986 (</guide/year/1986/>).

Mrs Thatcher, of all people, had, in her own peculiar way, saved the sitcom. It would be her only real service to Britain's comedy industry, but, in the circumstances, it was a very good service to have enacted.

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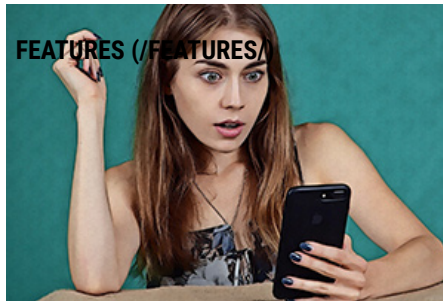


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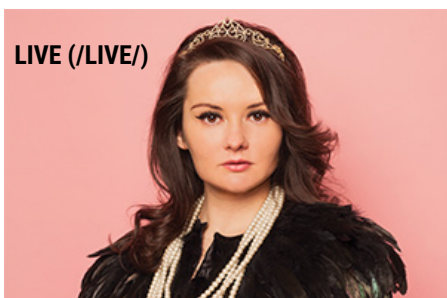


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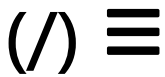


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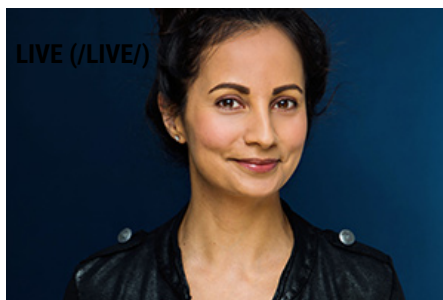


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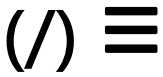
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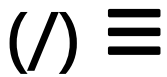
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