

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Being There*

(**USA, 1979. PG. 130 min. Cast:** Peter Sellers, Shirley Maclaine, Melvyn Douglas, Jack Warden; **Writer:** Jerzy Kosinski; **Music:** Johnny Mandel; **Cinematographer:** Caleb Deschanel; **Producer:** Andrew Braunsberg; **Director:** Hal Ashby)

Peter Sellers is a comedic icon.

His 30-year career – which will be showcased in the film series “Being Peter Sellers” from Nov. 26 to Dec. 2 at the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge – includes some of the funniest moments in film history. Sellers was a manic comedian that delved deep into roles and at his best when playing more than one character in a film. In fact, the comedian got his first professional break at the British Broadcasting Corporation by impersonating a top radio actor at BBC and giving himself a glowing recommendation to a studio producer.

Sellers was born Richard Henry Sellers on Sept. 8, 1925 in Southsea, England, to the parents of vaudevillian actors. He joined the Royal Air Force in 1943, where he met comedians Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe and Michael Bentine. The comedians would eventually form the Goon Squad for the now-legendary BBC radio program, “The Goon Show.” Debuting in 1951, the show remained on air until 1960 and paved the way for Monty Python with its absurd and surreal brand of humor. It also launched Sellers’ film career with “Down Among the Z Men” (1952, also known as “The Goon Movie”) and “The Ladykillers” (1955).

It was Sellers’ work in the 1960s that really displayed his virtuosity and cemented him as a comedic legend. 1963, in particular, kicked off a string of hits, each showcasing a different facet of his talent: physical

comedy, character development, timing and delivery. By the end of the 1960s, the actor had appeared in more than 25 films, including “Lolita” (1962); “Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb” (1964); and his James Bond-spoof “Casino Royale” (1967).

While his popularity waned in the 1970s, Sellers still provided audiences with proof of his undeniable comedic talent. By the mid 1970s, the actor had revitalized the role of Inspector Clouseau twice and appeared in about a dozen other movies. What ended up becoming his final tour de force, Sellers earned his only Golden Globe award win for best actor in the 1979 satire, “Being There.” He



also received best actor nominations from the New York Film Critics Circle and Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences (his second Academy nomination, his first was for “Dr. Strangelove” in 1964).

“Being There” is considered to be one the great modern film satires. It tells the story of Chance the Gardener (Sellers) who works as a gardener on a millionaire’s estate and knows everything of the world from TV. When his benefactor dies and he leaves the estate, the gardener gets hit by a car and becomes known as “Chauncey Gardiner,” becoming a political insider and a member of the social elite in Washington, D.C.

Former New York Times film critic Janet Maslin wrote in her Dec. 29, 1979, review that Peter Sellers portrays Chance with a “brilliant understatement.” She writes, “Hal Ashby directs ‘Being There’ at an unruffled, elegant pace, the better to let Mr. Sellers’s double-edged mannerisms make their full impression upon the audience. Mr. Sellers never strikes a false note, as he exhibits the kind of naïveté that the film’s other characters mistake for eccentricity.”

On July 24, 1980, Sellers died of a heart attack. He left behind a legacy of comedic performances that ranges from the absurd to the understated. About himself, Sellers once said that he wouldn’t know how to portray himself.

“I do not know who or what I am,” he said. “I writhe when I see myself on the screen. I’m such a dreadfully clumsy hulking image. I say to myself, ‘Why doesn’t he get off? Why doesn’t he get off?’ I mean, I look like such an idiot. Some fat awkward thing dredged up from some third-rate drama company. I must stop thinking about it, otherwise I shan’t be able to go on working.”

In an article reporting the death of Sellers, Chicago Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert wrote about the wit that Sellers displayed, as realized at a 1978 press conference for “The Revenge of the Pink Panther.” Ebert wrote that a reporter started to ask Sellers that the actor has had some heart attacks; Sellers interrupted the reporter and said, “Yes, but I plan to give them up. I’m down to about two a day.”

- Jason Nielsen