

(USA, 1976. PG. 94 min. Cast: Peter Sellers, Peter Falk, Eileen Brennan, James Coco, David Niven; **Writer:** Neil Simon; **Music:** Dave Grusin; **Cinematographer:** David M. Walsh; **Producer:** Ray Stark; **Director:** Robert Moore)

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. In “Murder by Death” in 1976, Sellers gives one of his more restrained performances in Neil Simon’s spoof, writes Dan Friedman in the “All Movie Guide.”

In “Murder by Death,” a millionaire recluse (Marlowe) invites famous detectives to his mansion, where he then locks them in and submits them to his death traps. The characters are all based on literary detectives, from Charlie Chan

(Sellers’ character), to Dashiell Hammett’s Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe. Starring alongside Peter Falk, Truman Capote, Alec Guinness and David Niven, Sellers delivers Simons’ dialogue with great timing in this ensemble piece.

Four years later, Sellers died of a heart attack on July 24, 1980. 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**



## Brattle Theatre Film Notes:

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