

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *A Shot in the Dark*

(USA, 1964. PG. 102 min. Cast: Peter Sellers, Elke Sommer, George Sanders, Herbert Lom; Writer: Marcel Achard, Harry Kurnitz; Music: Henry Mancini; Cinematographer: Christopher Challis; Produced & Directed by: Blake Edwards)

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 with now-legendary Goon Squad 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).

Some of the first movies that really cemented Sellers’ legacy were “The Pink Panther” (1963) and “A Shot in the Dark” (1964). As the bumbling French detective Inspector Clouseau, Sellers displays his uncanny knack for physical comedy. Trained as a dancer as a young child, he breathes life into “The Pink Panther” and sustains director Blake Edwards’ tour-de-force in “Shot in the Dark.” While the role of Clouseau was originally offered to Peter Ustinov, Sellers made it his own.

Former New York Times critic Bowsley Crowther wrote in his original review of “A Shot in the Dark” on June 12, 1964 that Edwards



fashioned a farce that moves the audience from gag to gag with Sellers “to plunge with it in the joyously free and facile way that he has so carefully developed as his own special comedy technique ... It is mad, but the wonderful dexterity and the air of perpetually buttressed dignity with which Mr. Sellers plays his role make what could quickly be monotonous enjoyable to the end. And the running gags are excellent, particularly one involving frequent bouts with an Oriental houseboy who is learning karate from him.”

Chicago Sun Times film critic Roger Ebert reported that Sellers developed Clouseau’s French accent after a concierge at a hotel Sellers used to stay at in Paris. Ebert wrote that Sellers told him that the concierge as a “master of dealing

with American tourists. He’d talk to them in a strange accent that wasn’t French but sounded French to an English-speaker.”

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. He rounded off the final decade of his life with masterful performances in “Murder by Death” in 1976 and “Being There” in 1979.

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, 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



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