

(France/USA, 1965. Not Rated. 108 min. Cast: Peter Sellers, Peter O'Toole, Romy Schneider, Capucine; Writer: Woody Allen; Music: Burt Bacharach; Cinematographer: Jean Badal; Producer: John C. Sheppridge; Director: Clive Donner)

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 often 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 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).

Two examples of Sellers’ range include “What’s New Pussycat?” in 1965 and

“The Party” in 1968. Directed by Clive Donner and written by Woody Allen, the 1965 comedy “What’s New Pussycat?” tells the story of a fashion editor (Peter O’Toole) trying to remain faithful to his fiancée, Carole (Romy Schneider). O’Toole seeks help from



Dr. Fassbinder (Sellers), who is trying to get together with a patient who has a crush on O’Toole. As the two plots intersect, Sellers’ performance thrives in the confusion.

While he shines alongside O’Toole in “What’s Up Pussycat?,” Sellers carries “The Party” with his performance as a mistakenly invited guest at a Hollywood party. A slapstick comedy of manners, Sellers plays the an actor from India that accidentally blows up the set of his first movie, gets blacklisted by his director and then, invited to the director’s party. Partnering up with his “Pink Panther” director, Edwards wrote a sparse script in order to allow Sellers and the other cast to improvise. It results in some excellent physical comedy.

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, 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