

Today I'll tell you about PETER SELLERS, one of the funniest men to ever live - but also one of the unhappiest (as is often the case with very funny men - they can be funny in public and very unhappy in private). Like RICHARD BURTON (who I told you about on May 4), he was born in 1925, and like Richard Burton - another unhappy man - he drank too much, and died very young. Burton was 58 when he died (in 1984), and Sellers didn't make it even to that age, dying in 1980 at the age of 54.



Growing up as a young man, Sellers started working in theatres and entertaining audiences with a mix of music and comedy. Then WORLD WAR II broke out, and Sellers joined ENSA, which was an organisation which provided entertainment for soldiers fighting in the war. After the end of the war, he wanted to keep on entertaining people and so he got a job at the BBC, appearing on the radio, and in 1951 he, SPIKE MILLIGAN and HARRY SECOMBE (pronounced 'See - come')

started broadcasting on radio a comedy show called THE GOON SHOW, which had an absolutely huge effect on British comedy. 20 years after that first broadcast, the two biggest comedy shows on TV - MONTY PYTHON'S FLYING CIRCUS and THE GOODIES - were completely inspired by The Goon Show. And The Goon Show was itself inspired by comedians like GROUCHO MARX - it was very weird and surreal, as you can see from this sketch from The Goon Show:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tjHIFPTwVvk>

Peter Sellers is the guy asking the time, and Spike Milligan is 'Eccles', the idiot who has the time written down. The Goon Show may have been very weird, but British audiences loved it, and Peter Sellers became a big star, on radio at least. But Peter Sellers really wanted to be a big film star, just like his hero ALEC GUINNESS, and he got his chance to appear in a film, with Alec Guinness, when he was cast as a young gangster in THE LADYKILLERS in 1955.

Another actor who appeared in the film was HERBERT LOM, and Sellers asked him for tips as to how he could make it big in the film industry. Lom laughed at him and said, 'Peter - you are not going to have any problems becoming a big star.' But he had to wait another four years to appear in a leading role in a film. In 1959, he appeared in three different roles in THE MOUSE THAT ROARED (about a tiny country that declares war on America, in the hope that it will be defeated, and taken over by America and get a lot of money spent on it), and made an absolutely brilliant film about British workers called I'M ALL RIGHT JACK. He was almost unrecognisable as 'Fred Kite' in 'I'm All Right Jack' - and it's probably his greatest ever performance. It was a



performance spotted by the brilliant American director STANLEY KUBRICK (who I'll tell you about sometime), who had made a number of films in America, but was looking to settle down in England and make films there. Kubrick cast Sellers in two films - LOLITA, in 1962, and DR STRANGELOVE, in 1964. In Dr Strangelove, Sellers imitated his hero Alec Guinness by playing multiple different roles (just like Guinness had done in KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS). Sellers was supposed to play four roles, but thought he wasn't being paid enough to play four roles and faked an injury that got him out of playing the fourth one. But he was an idiot - playing four different roles in a Stanley Kubrick film would have made him an absolute legend. But Sellers was always his own worst enemy.



In between filming Kubrick's films, Peter Sellers made THE PINK PANTHER, which came out in 1963. Sellers played INSPECTOR CLOUSEAU - an idiot French police officer who, despite his incredible stupidity, amazingly manages to catch 'The Phantom', a jewel thief who is planning to steal the Pink Panther diamond. The film made Peter Sellers into a huge international star, but it's actually not that funny. It's most famous for its theme tune, one of the most famous pieces of film music ever composed:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0YI9c3jc90>

Much funnier was the sequel to the Pink Panther which was rushed out in 1964 - A SHOT IN THE DARK, with the funny writer I told you about when I told you about Groucho Marx, WILLIAM PETER BLATTY, helping to write the script. Here is a clip from that film:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRNCIg86DKs>

After making that film, Peter Sellers said he wouldn't be making any more Inspector Clouseau films, but then in the 1970s, he was persuaded to come back to the role and make three more Pink Panther films, which had nothing to do with the Pink Panther diamond and gradually got less funny over time. But these scenes, from the 1976 film THE PINK PANTHER STRIKES AGAIN, show Sellers being very funny:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxFHPIFGFmk>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7Efjj3_uME



When Sellers made that film he was barely 50 years old, but was looking much older - and he only had four more years to live. But before he died, he reunited with his fellow Goons to make one last show (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XF745ywyvVY>) and made one last great film BEING THERE, about a simple-minded gardener who is forced to leave the place he has been working in since he was a child, and go out into the world, where he is mistaken for an amazing genius and ends up becoming a hugely important political adviser - without ever realising that people are hanging on his every word. He hoped that he would be awarded the Best Actor Oscar for his role in 'Being There'. Everything seemed to be lined up for him to win. Alec Guinness was due to be awarded a special honorary Oscar at the 1980 Oscars -

so he would get to win the Oscar in front of his hero. And people might have thought Sellers was 'owed' an Oscar for all his achievements in film, particularly those Kubrick films. But in the end DUSTIN HOFFMAN won for an over-the-top performance in a film called KRAMER v KRAMER. It was an injustice and broke Sellers' heart. He died shortly afterwards, unhappy to the end - but having done a huge amount to contribute a lot to the amount of joy in the world, which is what matters.