



PHOTO BY: JAAP BUIENDIJK ©HBO



Peter Levy focuses on The Life and Death of

Just mention the name Peter Sellers and you'll put a smile on people's faces. Sellers made an enduring impression on generations of movie fans all over the world.

The actor's name is all it takes to conjure up warm memories of such unforgettable movie characters as Inspector Clouseau (*The Pink Panther*), Chauncey Muffley (*Dr. Strangelove*) and president Merkin Muffley (*Being There*).

"I became aware of Peter Sellers when I was growing up in Australia," recalls Cinematographer Peter Levy, ASC, ACS. "It was a Saturday morning ritual for my family to gather around the radio and listen to him on *The Goon Show* on BBC. My father laughed uproariously."

Levy photographed *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* with Stephen Hopkins directing. The pair have collaborated frequently during the past 20 years. Geoffrey Rush was cast in the role of Sellers. The film has premiered on Home Box Office (HBO) in the United States in December and play on cinema screens in England and other countries. The film was framed in Academy aperture 1.85:1

aspect ratio. Levy notes that it will air on HBO in 16:9 format without altering his composition too much.

"Stephen (Hopkins) and I began our research by visiting places where Peter Sellers lived and worked in London, including Shepperton Studios, and also by watching scenes from his films to get a feeling for the man and his time and place," Levy says.

In early scenes, Sellers was 25 years old and overweight. He had his first heart attack when he was 39. As he began aging, Sellers had face-lifts and began going to tanning salons. He was gaunt and looked much older when he died at age 54.

Prosthetics

"The make-up department used prosthetics on Geoffrey to change the shape of his face in early scenes," Levy says. "I knew that the prosthetic make-up presented inherent problems with

the way light reflects off it compared to real skin. Sellers' face was a smooth blank canvas, while Geoffrey has a more rugged complexion. I decided not to use crosslight on Geoffrey's face so as to avoid emphasizing his contours and lines and used ProMist filters on the camera lenses to soften the look."

Levy didn't have time to shoot tests for every different look, but HBO agreed upfront that he could time the film in a digital intermediate (D.I.) suite.

"You can work differently if you know you're doing a D.I.," he says. "For instance, you don't need grad filters on camera lenses for big sky shots. You can use Power Windows later to isolate the sky and make it look consistent from shot to shot."

They had a 57 day shooting schedule, which was in effect 57 half-days because Rush was in almost every scene, and there were days when his make-up and prosthetics took up to seven hours to apply.



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"When Geoffrey was wearing the make-up and prosthetics, we shot all the scenes needed at that location," Levy says. "That made more sense than going back another day and re-doing the make-up."

Levy kept pace with an ambitious schedule by covering the action with two cameras, a Panaflex Platinum and an XL, mainly with Primo prime lenses. He used a Primo 11:1 zoom for full screen close-ups when he felt a prime lens would be too sharp or not long enough.

"I don't think any Cinematographer likes shooting with two cameras, because there is usually only one good angle and one right way to light it," he says, "but it does give the editor more material that matches cuts and therefore can reinforce the emotional content of scenes through stronger editing power, and that makes it worthwhile."

Levy's film palette included the Kodak VISION2 500T 5218 film and Kodak Vision 250D 5246 film. "I wanted daylight exteriors to have a certain luminance, so I often overexposed those shots by two thirds to a full stop," he says.

Peter Sellers

Above left: (L to R) Stephen Hopkins and Cinematographer Peter Levy shooting a scene for *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*.

Above right: (L to R) Actor Geoffrey Rush and Director Stephen Hopkins discussing a scene from the film.

Below: Actors Charlize Theron and Geoffrey Rush in a scene from *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*.

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Home movies

Levy also recreated a few scenes from the actor's black and white movies.

"I used (Eastman) 5222 Plus X black-and-white film because it has a richness in contrast and a beautiful glow in highlights that you can't get by desaturating color film in post-production," he says, "I used

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the same film for recreating Peter's home movies."

Levy explains that Sellers was a home-movie buff who usually shot on 16mm film. Levy chose to give those images a slightly edgy, staccato look by exposing the black-and-white film at 22 instead of 24 fps with a 45-degree shutter.

"Sometimes on home movie shots, I'd give the camera to Stephen (Hopkins)," Levy says, "because I don't think that a DP or an operator can frame or operate naively. I'd sneak up behind him and throw it out of focus while he was shooting, or maybe just bump him. That helped make it feel like a real home movie shot by Sellers."

Levy compiled a list of camera and lighting equipment that was used on the movie sets featured in the story. Lee Lighting Ltd., provided old period lamps used as props in some of those scenes that were originally shot on stages at Shepperton. When they were recreating



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some of those old movie scenes, they placed 1.2K HMIs inside old Brute arc light housings, so the audience sees them burning. They also used a blimped ARRiflex, Panavision PSR and early Panaflex cameras as props.

"Leaving room for serendipity is an important part of filmmaking."

"Our two working cameras were usually on a Steady Rig harness, or handheld to give the photography a feeling of immediacy," Levy says. "When the B camera was on a dolly, we avoided using tracks and just dollyed on the floor or carpet so its movement doesn't feel rehearsed or too perfect. There are some unorthodox shots, including a scene at the end where Sellers is doing a film with Blake Edwards.

"Sellers storms off the sound stage into a corridor. The camera goes one way and the actor goes the other way, and then it whips around to find him. On most contemporary films people would think it was a bad piece of operating and re-do it. I thought it was a fabulous shot that gives the scene a certain freshness, as if we were seeing it for the first time."

There were no storyboards. At the start of each day, Levy met with Hopkins and the first AD. They discussed what had to be accomplished. Then he watched rehearsals and got a sense of the Director's vision for the emotional content of each scene.

"Once you know the poetry, it's relatively easy to figure out how to capture it on film," he says.

"The look and the style aren't defined by any one technique or tool. It's a myriad of techniques and choices. One of the style dictates we gave ourselves

was that England was a darker place during the 1950s and '60s. There wasn't an emotional sense of as much light as there is now, so I didn't push light through windows. There was just a glow of cold light. As time goes by, the windows on sets got larger and we pushed more and warmer light through them."

Levy says there are some 30 to 40 permutations of Sellers at different ages, and playing various characters.



"It's important to let the actors know they have an ally on the other side of the camera," Levy says. "I like to light sets so that the actors feel that they have a stage to work upon, so they can be free to improvise. Geoffrey has performed as a mime, so it came naturally to him. He was funny and adlibbed fabulous lines. Leaving room for serendipity is an important part of filmmaking."

Some visual effects

There are a few visual effects shots. In one of them, Sellers walks from the street into a new car showroom. It was a virtual set. Levy filmed Sellers, the car salesman and several beautiful girls in front of a blue screen on a stage at Shepperton. Those images were composited with a CG background. Another time, Sellers walks past a mirror and doesn't see his own

reflection. He comes back and looks again, and there is still nothing there. The mirror was actually a blue screen. Levy photographed the other side of the room, which was later digitally composited into the mirror.

In another visual effects shot, Sellers is in the back of Stanley Kubrick's Rolls Royce. They are driving through London, arguing about the characters in **Dr. Strangelove**. Sellers gets up and steps out of the car, seemingly while it's moving. At that moment you realize that he is surrounded by rear projection screens. They were actually having a conversation in a car on the stage. He turns and now it is Rush also playing Kubrick.

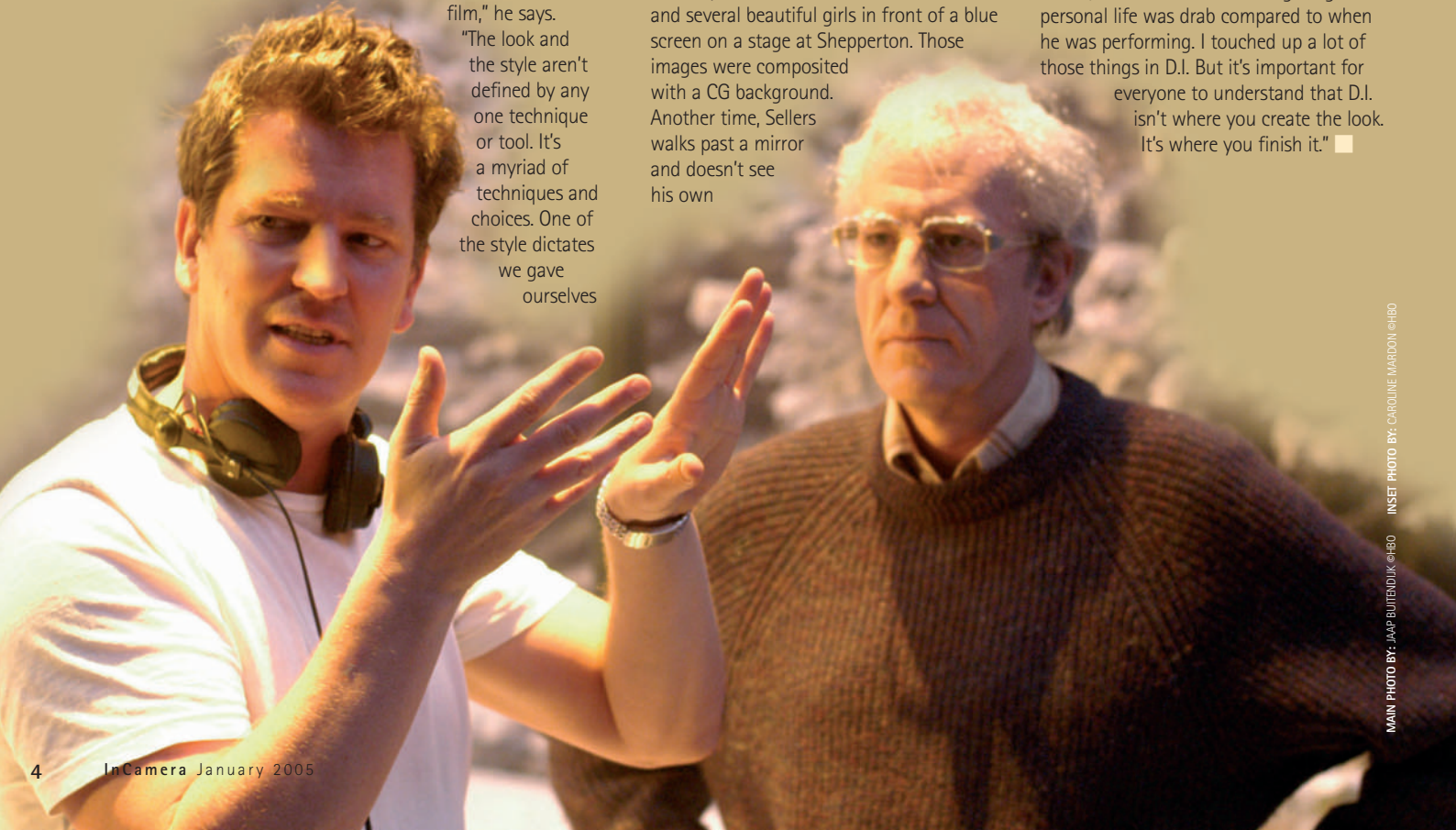
Levy timed and put the finishing touches on the film in a D.I. suite at EFILM.

"I had a fantastic rapport with (color timer) Steve Scott," Levy says. "I used Power Windows to manipulate images in early scenes to make the contrast slightly lower. We also mimicked older lenses that were used in the early Peter Sellers movies by creating a vignette effect with a slight darkening of the corners of the frame."

"With this technology, you can finesse lighting and tones and keep colors consistent," he says. "When a wall or a prop behind an actor was too bright or otherwise distracting, I asked Steve to tone it down to draw attention to the actors in the foreground. We did it in real-time, so we just kept going until I liked what I saw. Scenes from the early comedies are brightly lit. As his life gets darker, I used more dramatic lighting. His personal life was drab compared to when he was performing. I touched up a lot of those things in D.I. But it's important for everyone to understand that D.I. isn't where you create the look. It's where you finish it." ■

Inset: Actor Stanley Tucci in a scene from *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* shot by Cinematographer Peter Levy ASC, ACS.

Below: (L to R) Director Stephen Hopkins and actor Geoffrey Rush discussing a scene for the film.



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INSET PHOTO BY: CAROLINE MARDON ©HBO