

# Two-Way Stretch

by Emily Soares | June 21, 2009



One of four Peter Sellers films released in 1960, a meteoric year in his career, **Two Way Stretch** is a comedy full of site gags and double entendres, but one in which Sellers doesn't use a single disguise, funny voice or pratfall. His talent for comedic restraint is well balanced by the rest of the cast, which includes such gifted character actors as Wilfrid Hyde-White (*The Third Man*, 1949) and Lionel Jeffries (*Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, 1968).

**Two Way Stretch** is a quintessential caper film. Three prison trustees (Sellers, David Lodge and Bernard Cribbins) are living the life of Riley in an extremely lax lock-up, where they receive milk, eggs and the paper each morning and attend edifying classes to prepare them for life on the outside. With hard labor banned by the reformist prison governor (Maurice Denham), the quarry has been closed for years and prisoners enjoy an easy, albeit confining life, with all the modern conveniences. As Sellers and his cellmates contemplate the final days of their stay, Soapy (Hyde-White), the fourth in their gang, entices them to sneak out of prison to steal the Sultan's diamonds, which will be passing through town. Disguised as their vicar, Soapy meets them regularly during their final prison days to hatch the plan. Everything is going perfectly until their friendly warden is replaced by a hardnosed fanatic, Crout (Lionel Jeffries), who adds an unexpected risk to their plot.

Peter Sellers was wracked with insecurity throughout his career, and flouted his chameleon nature to mask the fact that he had no true personality of his own. He was in professional competition at the time with Jeffries, and, according to Sellers biographer Roger Lewis in the *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, he was so impressed by Jeffries' performance in **Two Way Stretch** that he repurposed pieces of it for several of his own characters, including Inspector Clouseau and Dr. Strangelove (at the time, however, he told others he thought Jeffries' acting was "over the top"). He also took Jeffries' line "Silence when you are talking to me!" for *What's New Pussycat?* (1965). In the next several years, however, Jeffries, a year younger than Sellers, aged quickly, and played men much older than he actually was for the rest of his career. In *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, for example, Jeffries plays Dick Van Dyke's father, though he was only six months older than him. Sellers and Jeffries reunited for one final film *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1979), during which Sellers reportedly called him at all hours of the night, seeking his advice.

Sellers' immersion in his roles is notable, and his first wife, Anne Howe, was never sure how deep he would go. Biographer Alexander Walker writes in *Peter Sellers*: "When the film character began 'possessing' Sellers, Anne was never quite sure who might be returning home that night. Sometimes it was a stranger, whose trancelike state she was powerless to break and not a little scared to behold. Perhaps it wasn't so alarming when only a convicted mastermind came through the front door, fresh from filming the comedy *Two Way Stretch*."

The film's director, Robert Day (*The Man with Bogart's Face*, 1980), remembers Sellers' seriousness about his acting in *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*: "'You *feel* with Peter as he reaches for a character...He works his way towards the perfection of the role.'"

Known for his excess, Sellers admitted he was always searching for happiness, going through material things-houses, cars, playthings-as readily as he seemed to change wives; he was on his fourth marriage when he died of a heart attack at the age of 55. *Being There* (1979) is considered Sellers' best role, though the far less critically acclaimed *The Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1980) marked his final feature.

Producer: M. Smedley Aston

Director: Robert Day

Screenplay: Vivian Cox, Len Heath, John Warren; Alan Hackney (additional dialogue)

Cinematography: Geoffrey Faithfull

Art Direction: John Box

Music: Ken Jones

Film Editing: Bert Rule

Cast: Peter Sellers (Dodger Lane), David Lodge (Jelly Knight), Bernard Cribbins (Lennie Price), Wilfrid Hyde-White (Soapy Stevens), Maurice Denham (The Governor), Lionel Jeffries (Chief P.O. Crout), Irene Handl (Mrs. Price), Liz Fraser (Ethel), Beryl Reid (Miss Pringle), Noel Hood (Miss Prescott), Myrette Morven (Miss Meakin), George Woodbridge (Chief P.O. Jenkins), Edwin Brown (Warder Charlie), Cyril Chamberlain (Gate Warder, Day), Wallas Eaton (Gate Warder, Night), Andrew Downie (Garden Warder).

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