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Sellers' sad side

Biographer paints unhappy picture of 'Pink Panther' comic

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Actor Peter Sellers stumbled his way through countless "Pink Panther" movies as the hapless Inspector Clouseau — but it was his private life that was really a shambles.

In "Mr. Strangelove: A Biography of Peter Sellers," acclaimed biographer Ed Sikov details Sellers' lonely childhood, clingy mother, failed marriages (four of them), violent outbursts, and physical and emotional abuse of his children.

"I did have a problem with Peter halfway through the project," said Sikov from his apartment in the Flatiron District. "His life was just so full of bad decisions and bad be-

havior. I got very depressed. It wasn't anger at him; it wasn't hatred.

"It was just — oh, Peter. Why? Why did you marry someone after two weeks? Why did you hit your son when he was a little boy? Why did you cause such insane trouble on 'Casino Royale' and sort of wreck the movie? Why, why, why?"

Like so many comedians, Sellers could be miserable when not performing. Peter O'Toole's former wife described tiptoeing past Sellers' room when he was a houseguest, because she could hear him crying.

Even performing wasn't such a thrill — Sellers



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grew increasingly difficult on film sets, and despised the lowbrow crowds who came to see him do his shtick in person when the classic radio series "The Goon Show" made him a star.

"The craziest story was [from] Alec Guinness," said the 45-year-old author. "On the set of 'Murder By Death,' Sellers demanded a larger dressing room trailer than anyone else. And Guinness actually saw him on his hands and knees measuring it with a measuring tape. That level of complete lunacy surprised me."

Of course, there are also tales of rage, of buying toys for his son but not letting the boy touch them

until Sellers was bored with them, of obsessively purchasing cars and expensive audio and video equipment.

As Sikov aptly puts it in his book, "[Sellers] could be a selfish, childish man, responsive to every need as long as it was his own."

Did we mention his stormy marriage to Britt Ekland? Or the time he got engaged to Liza Minnelli after three days of dating, despite the fact that she was already engaged to Desi Arnaz Jr.? It lasted a few weeks until — at least in part — a celebrity psychic told Minnelli it wouldn't work out.

Sellers could hardly complain: He also regularly consulted a psychic, and told people he spoke to his dead mother every day.

Of course, none of his private life would matter if Sellers hadn't been such a genius on camera. Sikov's last book — "On

Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder" — was widely acclaimed for showing equal insight into the director's personal life and his career. That balance continues with this biography.

Sikov looks at every Sellers performance, from obscure two-reelers to his collaborations with greats like Blake Edwards, Hal Ashby and Stanley Kubrick.

And then there are the films: "Lolita," "Dr. Strangelove," "The Ladykillers," "A Shot in the Dark," "The Party," and many others, including his crowning achievement of the blank but compelling Chauncey Gardner in "Being There."

"He was a difficult man and a troubled man," said Sikov. "But his work is extraordinary."

"You couldn't get 'Being There' without [Sellers spending] essentially his entire lifetime being troubled, feeling empty and characterless and selfless."