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ZOOM

in on america

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A Perfect Cop

Peter Falk experienced his most spectacular success as an actor in the 1960s and 70s as Lt Columbo. Nonetheless, when he died on June 23, 2011 at his Beverly Hills home, film lovers across the world, both young and old, shared a moment of grief. For everyone knows that a great film personality is gone.



Photo ©AP Images

In this issue: Peter Falk

Zoom in on America

Just One More Thing ...



(left) Peter Falk shown May 14, 1972, winner for best performance by an actor in a leading role in a dramatic series;



(right) Peter Falk with wife Shera (photos © AP Images)

Peter Michael Falk was born in Manhattan on September 16, 1927. His family roots can be traced to Russia (on his mother's side) and Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic (on his father's side.) When he was only three, a teacher at his preschool noticed that he was cocking his head to one side while trying to look at something. His mother took him to an eye doctor to have his eyes examined. The diagnosis was a malignant tumor in the right eye. The eye had to be removed.

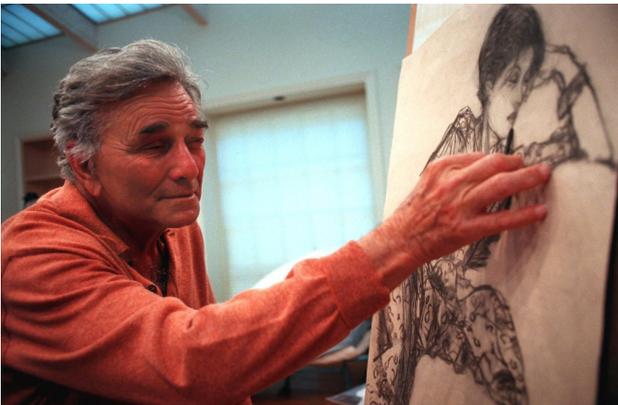
Though he was very young when it happened and he quickly learned to live with just one eye to see and the other made of glass, Falk distinctly remembered all his life the details of his hospitalization. It was hard, but he accepted the situation and his glass eye even offered him an opportunity to occasionally play tricks on others. At school Falk was a star athlete, especially in baseball and basketball. When during a baseball game he was ruled out by the umpire when Falk thought he was safe, he took out his glass eye and handed it to the umpire with the words: "Try this!"

Falk graduated from public administration at Syracuse University and got a job as an "efficiency expert." Many years later he recalled it with his usual sense of humor. "I was such an efficiency expert," he said in an interview, "that the first morning on the job, I couldn't find the building where I was to report for work."

This is not surprising. All his life Peter Falk struggled with an extremely poor sense of direction. In his tribute written after Falk's death, his longtime German friend, filmmaker Wim Wenders recalls shooting a film with Falk in Berlin. Working with Falk was great fun, but finding him after breaks was difficult. The actor's favorite pastime was walking, so he would wander off the studio for his break and almost immediately ... get lost. Police had to be called to find him and bring him back to the studio. Soon, he made friends with all the officers and knew them by their first name.

This is not surprising, either. After all he was a cop himself, if only on the screen. Before the world got to know Lieutenant Columbo, Peter Falk had to discover for himself that his vocation was not a job as an efficiency expert or a Merchant Marine cook (a short episode at the end of World War II,) but acting. He joined an Eva La Gallienne class for professional actors, pretending he was one. The truth was discovered, but instead of getting angry with the young theater enthusiast, the famous actress wrote him a letter of recommendation, which opened a door for Falk to the William Morris Talent Agency in New York.

Predictions by some agents that Falk would never have an acting career due to his fake eye, which they called a "deficiency," turned out to be wrong.



Peter Falk works on a charcoal drawing at his home studio in Beverly Hills ; (right) Falk at NBC's 75th anniversary celebration at New York's Rockefeller Center in 2002 photos © AP Images

... Peter Falk's Life & Movies



(left) Falk on location for "Columbo Likes the Nightlife" in this October 29, 2002 photo; (right) at the 27th International Film Festival in Cannes, France, on May 18, 1974 photos © AP Images

Falk got contracts, off-Broadway at first, but the Broadway ones soon came his way.

Before he starred in the Columbo series, he had 2 nominations for an Academy Award and received an Emmy Award for his role as a truck driver in the TV movie "The Price of Tomatoes" - quite impressive for a self-made actor.

However, 1971 turned out to be a breakthrough year for him. The role of Lieutenant Columbo was tailor-made for him, though at the beginning other actors, Bing Cosby and Lee J. Cobb, were also considered for the part. The series continued for eight years and it has been repeated on TV many times since. The first episodes were directed by a young Steven Spielberg.

What made Columbo such an international success? Peter Falk believed it was the character of the Los Angeles police detective. But it was Falk who created the image and the famous idiosyncrasies: the beat-up raincoat, an old vehicle that refuses to start, the wife who never shows, but about whom he talks constantly, his searching for matches to light a cigar, his attempts to locate where he put his notebook, his dachshund dog and many, many more.

Part of Columbo's appeal is that he is like an average person in the street. More than that, he is

like each of us, neither beautiful nor rich. But under this unattractive surface "a good mind is at work," and a good man too. He hates violence, noise and the sound of gun shots. However, when it comes to nailing the murderer, he is relentless. He has a good mind and he has intuition. No crime is perfect when Lieutenant Columbo sets to work on it.

Columbo was the role of his life, but there were many others. His most important movies include "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World," "Murder by Death," "The Cheap Detective," "Husbands," and "A Woman Under the Influence."

Peter Falk was married twice. With his first wife, a fellow college student Alyce Mayo he had two adopted daughters. His second wife was actress Shera Danese, who starred in a few Columbo movies. In later years Falk developed a love of drawing with charcoal and spent long hours drawing in a studio adapted from a garage.

In 2006 Falk wrote an autobiography. In the title he used the words from the Columbo series when the Lieutenant finishes interrogating the suspect, but on his way out he turns and says: "Oh, there's just one more thing ..." Sadly, there will be no more things. On June 23, 2011 Peter Falk died after a long struggle with Alzheimer's disease.



(left) Television personalities Mr. T of A-Team, left, and Peter Falk ; (right) Filmmakers and the stars of Touchstone Pictures' "Corky Romano" reunite for the cast and crew screening at the El Capitan Theatre in Hollywood on Monday, October 8, 2007 - photos © AP Images

Activity Page

■ **Exercise 1** Here are some sentences about the late Peter Falk. Decide whether they are true or false:

1. His family came from Italy.
2. He was very good at sports while at school.
3. He lied his way into a group for professional actors taught by Eva La Gallienne.
4. He started starring as Lieutenant Columbo as a replacement for Bing Cosby.
5. He received two nominations for the Academy Award.
6. His hobby in his later years was drawing and he rented an artist studio in which to create his art.
7. He believed that the success of the Columbo series was due to the character of the hero.

■ **Exercise 2** Speaking

Work in pairs. Describe your favorite actor or actress to your partner without giving his or her name. You can describe the way they look, how old they are, where they live or what characters they play. Ask your partner, if they know who you are talking about. If they don't, mention the titles of the movies they starred. Can they guess the name now?

■ **Exercise 3** Writing

When you write a film review, one part of it is a short description of the plot. However, you are not supposed to give the film ending away. After all, your reader may want to go to the cinema encouraged by your review. You usually use present tense while summarizing the plot.

What movie have you watched recently? Write a short summary of the plot and give your reasons for liking or disliking the film.

■ **Exercise 4** Speaking

Work in a bigger group or as a class. Discuss the importance of the title for a movie and the way they are translated into other languages. The translated title is sometimes very different from the original title. Why is that so? Can you give examples of titles that are not direct translations?

■ **Exercise 5** Vocabulary study

Study the words below. Which would be useful for a/ an actor/actress, b/ police detective, c/ both. List them in the order of relevance.

Then make some sentences to justify your choices.

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. perseverance | 11. intelligence |
| 2. stubbornness | 12. slim figure |
| 3. good looks | 13. truthfulness |
| 4. meticulousness | 14. inventiveness |
| 5. patience | 15. erudition |
| 6. physical fitness | 16. absent-mindedness |
| 7. sense of humor | 17. strength |
| 8. musical ear | 18. resourcefulness |
| 9. impartiality | 19. creativity |
| 10. far-sightedness | 20. gullibility |

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