

Of Moby Dick, Brand, Patrick McGoohan, and Cheese Lover Wallace By David Barrie

I recently had the good fortune to stumble across the autobiography of Peter Sallis, the well known character actor, who found fame nationally later in life, initially as Clegg in 'Last of the Summer Wine', then world-wide fame as the voice of cheese-loving Wallace partnered by his faithful dog Gromit.

I had remembered that Sallis knew Patrick, appeared with him in 'Brand', and when interviewed praised Patrick's performance very generously. So it was with some optimistic anticipation that I began reading 'Summer Wine and Other Stories', and I must say I enjoyed this very readable book very much indeed. Sallis writes well, is self-deprecating, and his memories come alive off the page.

Of course, I wanted to know more about Peter's memories of working with Patrick. The pair first met when he was invited by the great Sheffield Rep. Manager Geoffrey Ost to join the cast. In addition to working with Patrick, as we know Paul Eddington was also a member of the Company.

After some time Sallis left for London and met McGoohan again for the famed Orson Welles 1955 production of 'Moby Dick'. Moby Dick – Rehearsed was a two-act drama written by Orson. It was bold, imaginative, and perhaps something that only the colourful Orson could devise. The premise is that a group of actors convene in a bare theatre ostensibly to rehearse for a play, when the actor-manager (Orson) appears and tells them in fact that instead they will rehearse an adaptation of Moby Dick he has been working on. Grudgingly they consent, utilising whatever props are to hand, and by use of their craft, dialogue, and lighting, encourage the audience to be swept along with them in their imaginations.

MOBY DICK
Cast in order of their appearance:

A YOUNG ACTOR (afterwards "Ishmael") ... GORDON JACKSON
 A YOUNG ACTRESS (afterwards "Pip") ... JOAN FLOWRIGHT
 A STAGE MANAGER (afterwards "Flask") ... PETER SALLIS
 AN ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER (afterwards "Boison") ... JOHN GRAY
 A SECOND ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER (afterwards "Tashlugs" & "Captain of the Rachtel") JOHN BOYD-BRENT
 A STAGE HAND WITH AN HARMONICA (afterwards "Portuguese Sailor" and "Dagoo")... JOSEPH CHELTON
 OTHER STAGE HANDS ... PHILIPPE FERROTET
 HARRY CORDWELL
 DAVID SAIRE
 A MIDDLE-AGED ACTOR (afterwards "Shubb") ... WENSLEY PITHEY
 AN EXPERIENCED ACTOR (afterwards "Peleg" and "Old Cornish Sailor") JEFFERSON CLIFFORD
 A SERIOUS ACTOR (afterwards "Starbuck") ... PATRICK MCGOOHAN
 A VERY SERIOUS ACTOR (afterwards "Elijah" "Ship's Carpenter" "Old Bedford Sailor" and others) KENNETH WILLIAMS
 AN ACTOR MANAGER (afterwards "Father Muzzle" and "Ahab") ... ORSON WELLES

The action of the play takes place in a provincial American theatre towards the end of the last century

The play will be presented in two parts with one interval of 15 minutes

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It is intended that this play, now presented for a limited season of four weeks, shall form part of a programme of repertory to be presented by Mr. Welles in the forthcoming season.

Catered by Messrs. E. J. Simons Ltd. Lighting Equipment by Strand Electrical and Engineering Co. Ltd. Sound by Bishop Sound. Virginia Cigarettes by Abdulla.

The Management reserves the right to refuse admission, also to make any alteration in the cast which may be considered necessary by them or other reasonable causes.


SMOKING IS NOT PERMITTED IN THE AUDITORIUM

Moby Dick
—Rehearsed

A DRAMA IN TWO ACTS

By Orson Welles

Being an adaptation—for the most part in blank verse—of the novel by Herman Melville.



Samuel French, Inc.

Sallis played A Stage Manager/ 'Flask'. McGoohan was Starbuck. Sallis writes, "...And I had to turn to McGoohan and say the next line. I was frightened and thought the world was about to come to an end, and I stared down at the floor, and I said, as best I could, 'What do you make of that, Mr Starbuck, ain't there something a bit queer about that?' and McGoohan, who has a stronger mind than I have, looked me straight in the forehead and said, 'I fear me you are right, Ahab has that which is bloody on his mind.' How we got through that little passage I don't know, but it was greatly to our credit." Sallis relates how Welles filmed some 75 minutes of footage of the play. But then the money ran out. And after the play's run ended that was that.

Years later Sallis was talking with Patrick who related that it was not the end of filming. One day Patrick got a message from Orson who was filming in a Turin studio asking him to go there immediately, then also instructed him to bring some technical equipment. So Patrick did as he was told and booked into a hotel as instructed. He had been told to wait until called for, but (being McGoohan) decided to visit Orson, whom he found filming another of Orson's pet projects, 'Around the World with Orson Welles', which in fact was nothing more than merely a number of artfully decorated sets in this Italian studio. Anyway, no progress could be made and it was the end of 'Moby Dick'.

Years later Sallis received a telegram from Orson to join him on his film project 'Kafka'. Whilst working on this, one evening they were dining and the talk turned to 'Moby Dick' and actors and McGoohan's name cropped up. Sallis writes, "He was less, shall I say, accommodating about McGoohan, but I suspect that this was because McGoohan had his measure, and McGoohan could have taken him for the whole eighteen holes, if you know what I mean".

Of the raw film footage itself, McGoohan said in a 1986 interview that the excerpt that he saw while Welles was reviewing the rushes one day was fantastic. Others also back this up. However it is thought the film was lost in a 1970 fire (caused by the actor Robert Shaw smoking in bed) at Orson's Spanish home! (Although Roger Langley's McGoohan biography covers a later impounding of the film for import duties).

In 1959 Sallis had the chance to appear in the rightly acclaimed production of 'Brand' starring Patrick in the title role. The BBC agreed to record and televise the play. For some three pages Sallis enthuses over Patrick's performance. Here is a flavour. *"His effect on the cast, well certainly on me, was magnetic...I couldn't help thinking, even though he was a mate of mine, this is a real privilege. I am working with somebody now who is actually giving as near to a great performance as you can possibly get.... His eyes – you couldn't take your eyes off him, and they really did drill right through you. Very, very moving, and very, very satisfying as an actor to be in that sort of presence. I don't think it happens very often.... They had, in Patrick McGoohan, probably the only man in the country who could have played that part. Single-minded, physically of the right strength - I'm tempted to say when he was on full throttle, he was the best actor we had."*

Sallis then suggests the reader source the DVD of Brand (filmed by the BBC as a special presentation) so we can see for ourselves this exceptional performance.

The reader is left in no doubt as to the high regard Sallis held for Patrick. So, to conclude, my suggestion is you locate a copy of 'Summer Wine and Other Stories', published by John Blake, London, ISBN 978-1-78219-745-4, and of course without hesitation seek the DVD of Brand, which can be sourced over the internet. It has the addition of an interview with Peter Sallis. You will be well rewarded.

