



## SIDNEY POITIER: HIS OWN PERSON

# Stir Crazy

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Director: Sidney Poitier

©: Columbia Pictures Industries Inc.

Production Company:

Columbia Pictures Corporation

Executive Producer: Melville Tucker

Producer: Hannah Weinstein

Associate Producer: François de Menil

Unit Production Manager: Mickey McCardle

Production Co-ordinator: Claire Mactague

Location Manager: Ron Carr

Research Consultant: Patricia J. O'Donohue

Assistant Directors: Daniel J. McCauley,

Joseph Moore, Don Wilkerson

Screenplay: Bruce Jay Friedman

Director of Photography: Fred Schuler

Camera Operators: Joe Marquette Jr, Dennis Smith

Special Effects: Larry Fuentes

Editor: Harry Keller

Production Designer: Alfred Sweeney

Set Decorator: Arthur Jeph Parker

Costume Designer: Patricia Edwards

Men's Costumes: David Rawley, Marie V. Brown

Make-up: Richard Cobos

Titles and Opticals: MGM Title

Music: Tom Scott

Choreography: Scott Salmon

Sound Recording: Glen Anderson

Sound Re-recording: Wayne Artman,

Tom Beckert, Michael Jiron

Sound Effects: Jeff Bushelman, Pat Somersert,

Burbank Editorial and Sound Service

Stunt Co-ordinator: Mickey Gilbert

Head Wrangler: Jim Medearis

Cast:

Gene Wilder (*Skip Donahue*)

Richard Pryor (*Harry Monroe*)

Georg Stanford Brown (*Rory Schultebrand*)

JoBeth Williams (*Meredith*)

Miguelangel Suárez (*Jesus Ramirez*)

Craig T. Nelson (*Deputy Ward Wilson*)

Barry Corbin (*Warden Walter Beatty*)

Charles Weldon (*Blade*)

Nicolas Coster (*Warden Henry Sampson*)

Joel Brooks (*Len Garber*)

Jonathan Banks (*Jack Graham*)

Erland van Lidth De Jeude (*Grossberger*)

Lewis Van Bergen (*1st guard*)

Lee Purcell (*Susan*)

Karmin Murcelo (*Teresa Ramirez*)

Franklyn Ajaye (*young man in hospital*)

Estelle Omens (*Mrs. R. H. Broache*)

Peter Looney (*1st kicker*)

Cedric Hardman (*Big Mean*)

Doug Johnson (*2nd guard*)

Henry Kingi (*Ramon*)

Joseph Massengale (*Cesare Geronimo*)

Herman Poppe (*Alex*)

Luis Avalos (*Chico*)

Esther Sutherland (*Sissie*)

Pamela Poitier (*cook's helper*)

James Oscar Lee (*2nd kicker*)

Rod McCary (*minister*)

Claudia Cron (*Joy*)

Bill Bailey (*announcer*)

Donna Benz (*Nancy*)

Grand Bush (*Big Mean's sidekick*)

Alvin Ing (*Korean doctor*)

Thomas Moore (*judge*)

Danna Hansen (*Mrs Sampson*)

Gwen Van Dam (*Mrs Beatty*)

Herb Armstrong (*County Jail guard*)

Herbert Hirschman (*man at dinner party*)

On a crisp March morning, some 90 newcomers went into the maximum-security block of the Arizona State Penitentiary. Leading the party the way were Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor.

They were in the jail for a two-week stretch – filming sequences for *Stir Crazy*, the Columbia Pictures comedy about a pair of showbiz hopefuls stranded in a small town who are framed for a bank robbery they didn't commit.

With Sidney Poitier as director, the Hannah Weinstein Production co-stars Georg Stanford Brown and JoBeth Williams. Weinstein produced the record-breaking comedy from a screenplay by Bruce Jay Friedman.

For Pryor and Wilder, *Stir Crazy* marks a resumption of the comic rapport that began when they played opposite – and off – each other in *Silver Streak*.

'Certain actors just naturally connect with each other,' says Pryor. 'After the fun we had in *Silver Streak*, the only question was when... not if... we would get together again.'

Wilder expresses it his own way. 'Our instincts seem to coalesce,' he says. 'The difference, this time, is that *Stir Crazy* is an out-and-out comedy while *Silver Streak* was a mixture of mystery, adventure and romance.'

'You could almost say that our Pryor picture was a ball but this one is Wilder,' says his co-star with a grin.

'Their initiation to prison life is funny because it's also so scary,' says director Poitier, who returns to moviemaking with *Stir Crazy* after a two-year break to write his autobiography.

'It's a fulfilment of a fear virtually every law-abiding citizen has experienced. 'What... if through no fault of your own... you are suddenly thrown into prison, surrounded by muggers, murderers, the dregs of society? How do you cope?'

'It's a very funny concept,' says Wilder. 'But what makes it work is a hard edge of reality, a sense of the frustration and the potential for violence, which exists in prison. It sets off the craziness Richard and I indulge in.'

'The credit for that goes to Sidney Poitier who knows actors... loves actors... and cast the characters in this film as ingeniously as any director I've ever worked with.'

In setting location schedules for *Stir Crazy* – which moved from Times Square to Los Angeles to Tucson, Arizona – Poitier was determined to film at a real 'working' prison.

That was easier said than done. Prison officials are reluctant to throw open their clanging gates to filmmakers – on the grounds that while actors and technicians are swarming in, the permanent residents may be wandering out. (Usually, such scenes are shot in abandoned jails – like the Lincoln Jail in downtown Los Angeles – where the paraphernalia of crime and punishment are kept in well-oiled working order for the purpose.)

But in the case of *Stir Crazy*, with its plot twist of a prison rodeo, life imitated art. For two years, Warden Robert Raines of the Arizona State Prison had tried to organise such a rodeo. The major obstacle was the cost of constructing an arena, complete with grandstand, stables and livestock chutes.

When Columbia Pictures enquired about renting the facility, the warden saw it as a way to realise his dream. Provided that security could be maintained, the prison was available for a fee which – hardly by coincidence – matched the budget for the new rodeo grounds.

Don Circle (*bank teller*)  
Madison Arnold (*3rd guard*)  
Gene Earle (*sheriff*)  
Tracey Lee Rowe (*little girl*)  
Essex Smith (*Blade's friend*)  
Kenneth Menard (*repairman*)  
Billy Beck (*flycatching prisoner*)  
USA 1980  
111 mins  
35mm

The screening on Wed 29 Jan will be introduced by researcher and curator Matthew Barrington

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'There was a fringe benefit we didn't anticipate,' adds the warden. 'Morale in the prison was never higher. Some 350 inmates signed on as extras, playing themselves, and the rest – even the most notorious troublemakers – stayed on their best behaviour.'

'There were simply no incidents.'

That did not minimise the initial anxiety of co-stars Pryor and Wilder.

'It looks mean,' was Pryor's first reaction to the imposing stone compound with its barbed-wire décor.

'It looks like where I went to school,' suggested Wilder.

'Stay out of the laundry,' advised Pryor.

'Why?' asked his co-star.

'That's where Jimmy Cagney got it in *Each Dawn I Die*. In the laundry. Trust me. I know. They always do it to you in the laundry.'

Such bantering aside, however, both stars were soon at ease in their new surroundings. Pryor, who has taken part in prison shows in the past, staged impromptu comedy performances during the long waits between 'takes'. Wilder played draughts and dominoes with the inmates and answered a steady stream of questions about acting, filmmaking and career opportunities in the arts. A basketball game was staged between the inmate team and a squad composed of production workers.

To Wilder, the reality of *Stir Crazy* posed a major problem.

'Sidney Poitier is a stickler for details,' Wilder explains. 'When you lift a rock, under Sidney's direction, you lift a real rock – not a balsa wood phony. When you dig a ditch, the earth better move for you, baby. In one scene, I'm confined to a torture chamber called "the box", a sealed metal compartment 3 feet by 4 feet, as punishment.'

'It was 35 degrees outside and hot enough in the "box" to cook steak. I came out dripping perspiration and my legs were wobbling. Sidney was delighted. "You're really acting," he said. "Who's acting?" I asked.'

Wilder adds that being directed by a fellow actor is a 'wonderful experience, especially when it's someone you respect as much as I do Sidney.'

'When he suggests a bit of business, he takes you aside to talk about it privately. That way, it comes as a surprise to the other actors and the scene is spontaneous.'

'Most directors wouldn't even realise that it makes a difference.'

Richard Pryor agrees, but says that one sequence in *Stir Crazy* was 'too spontaneous'. It lasts only a few seconds on film and shows Pryor – serving as a rodeo clown – being chased across the ring and over a gate by an enraged bull.

'That bull was no bull, if you got my drift,' says Pryor. 'He was a mean mother... and he really was coming after me... it wasn't trick photography.'

'You had a 50-foot head start,' reminded Wilder.

'Yeah... but the bull was catching up quick. I think Sidney forgot to pull him aside and tell him about professional courtesy to other actors.'

Production notes