



'Being There' Promotional Film

USA 1979

3 mins

Video

Being There

Directed by: Hal Ashby

©: Lorimar Film-und Fernsehproduktion GmbH

Production Company: North Star International

Made in association with:

CIP-Europäische Treuhand

Presented by: Lorimar Productions Inc.

Executive Producer: Jack Schwartzman

Produced by: Andrew Braunsberg

Associate Producer: Charles B. Mulvehill

Location Manager: Spencer Quinn

1st Assistant Director: David S. Hamburger

Script Supervisor: Edle Bakke

Casting: Lynn Stalmaster

Screenplay by: Jerzy Kosinski

Based on the novel by: Jerzy Kosinski

Director of Photography: Caleb Deschanel

Camera Operator: Nick McLean

Gary Burns Show Video Segment Directed by:

Don Mischer

Special Photography: Dianne Schroeder

Editor: Don Zimmerman

Editorial Consultant: Mireille Machu

Production Designer: Michael Haller

Art Director: James Schoppe

Costumes Designed by: May Routh

Peter Sellers' Make-up: Charles Schram

Shirley MacLaine's Make-up: Frank Westmore

Peter Sellers' Hairstylist: Vivienne Walker

Shirley MacLaine's Hairstylist: Edie Panda

Titles Designed by: Pablo Ferro

Music: Johnny Mandel

Production Sound Mixer: Jeff Wexler

Re-recording Mixers: Donald O. Mitchell,

Rick Kline, Bill Nicholson

Cast:

Peter Sellers (*Chance*)

Shirley MacLaine (*Eve Rand*)

Melvyn Douglas (*Benjamin Turnbull Rand*)

Jack Warden (*'Bobby', the president*)

Richard Dysart (*Dr Robert Allenby*)

Richard Basehart (*Vladimir Skrapinov*)

Ruth Attaway (*Louise*)

David Clennon (*Thomas Franklin*)

Fran Brill (*Sally Hayes*)

Denise Dubarry (*Johanna*)

Hal Ashby (*man in Washington Post office*) *

USA-Germany 1979©

130 mins

Digital

* Uncredited

In Character: The Films of Peter Sellers

Being There

The deep appeal [to Sellers] of *Being There*, with its Little Boy Lost hero, can immediately be understood. Chance isn't shy or mute, or a zombie, he is a child – the child trapped in the big body (You's always goin' to be a little boy, ain't you?' says Louise the maid). To acquire the novella's film rights, Sellers set about bewitching and bewildering Jerzy Kosinski. 'It started in 1971 when I was in London,' said the author. 'He left me a message saying C. Gardiner had called. It turned out to be Peter Sellers. For seven and a half years he sent cables [such as "Available my garden or outside it"], letters on special headed paper, and left baffling messages on my answering machine. Gradually we became friends and whenever we met he would do a Chauncey Gardiner act. I gave in finally.'

'I remember after years of telling me he could play Chance ... once, in Malibu, he proved it,' said Kosinski. We were walking in a garden at a friend's house and he saw a small tree that was drying out. Dying. He bent stiffly, picked up the hose, and began watering the little tree. Very quietly. Complete contentment on his face. He was Chance. Nobody thought Chance was even a *character*, but Peter *knew* that man.'

Roger Lewis, *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* (Century, 1994)

If the perfect fool of Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*, who seems to rise by sheer weightlessness to the highest office in the land, has a predecessor in the comic literature of the United States, it is probably the billionaire prankster of Terry Southern's *The Magic Christian*. Southern's Guy Grand and Kosinski's Chance ('Chauncey Gardiner') are ostensibly as different as night and day, but what they exemplify, in respectively active and passive fashion, is the gullibility of the public and the fallibility of its egalitarian doctrine that any man can be President – and/or rich, powerful and famous. The grand-daddy of them both, perhaps, is the Great Gatsby – the romantic apotheosis of the myth of the man who came from nowhere to make it big, but who remains an enigma, a blank, the man who has everything but the one thing he wants (which is where the movies, and *Citizen Kane*, come in).

That both Chance and Grand should be played on the screen by Peter Sellers is, of course, another connection. That Sellers, apparently, should have been eager to play Kosinski's non-hero since the book's first publication in 1971 suggests even more curious intertwinings of actor and persona, of comic type and national stereotype. *Being There* would be an inconceivable comedy in an English setting, where a perfectly unconscious impostor like Chance – his blank seeming challenges others to define his being – would have to become a conscious artificer of the tics of class. Yet for Sellers, the English mime of a thousand such faces and mannerisms, the *tabula rasa* of Chance represents some ultimate refinement of the mimic's art. Wholly restricted in gesture, expression and intonation, Chance is simply the reflection of what he sees (or is shown by television), a minimal personality containing everything and nothing.

Given the terse, elliptical way Kosinski tells his story, it might have been created for just such an acting exercise. It is a one-joke enterprise – how a man who says nothing, does nothing, is nothing can seem immensely important and powerful – which the author resists overplaying by never quite delivering. The sequence of events by which Chance comes to this position is so outrageous, and so little justified in narrative terms, that the result is less a story than a

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Being There

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playfully extreme hypothesis which a behaviourist might have doodled for his own amusement. Chance, we are asked to accept, is a foundling who grows to adulthood knowing only his own quarters in the house where he has been taken in, the garden he tends, and the television he otherwise watches constantly. With the death of his patron, the Old Man, he is forced to leave-house and garden; he is immediately involved in an accident and taken into the home of a powerful but dying financier and his much younger wife, where he is soon meeting the President, the press, diplomats and industrialists. His one topic of conversation, how to make a garden grow, and his placid response to every situation – having no self to reveal, he simply acts out what he has seen on television – are soon taken as evidence of some secret political wisdom and power. Such an ideal embodiment of consensus politics is destined, the ending implies, for the White House.

Hal Ashby's *Being There* from time to time looks in danger of giving too much weight to this slender fable, of elaborating its sarcastic 'what if' into sententious satire. To begin with, it must be practically unique, as an adaptation which has tried to remain completely faithful to its source (Kosinski also wrote the script), in finding it necessary to amplify the original, to add material rather than prune it, in order to fill out a two hour-plus running time. The story has also been relocated from New York to Washington to heighten, in the words of a *New York Times* interview, 'the identification with political power'.

The additions are scrupulously in keeping, and usefully tease some humour out of the bald absurdity of the premise. Chance, for instance, is now allowed to wander for a while in the outside world, before his accident and his second immurement, blankly making the acquaintance of the crumbling city's flora and fauna. What principally keeps the story to its one-track course is Sellers' one-note performance, which steadfastly refuses to tip the wink to the audience as he amiably soaks up TV images and as amiably fields them back to his baffled interlocutors, equally one-note characters here judiciously fleshed out as stars: Melvyn Douglas and Shirley MacLaine as the ailing financier and his frustrated wife; Jack Warden as the gruffly uncharismatic President.

If Sellers seems to have become symbiotically involved in the character, one should also count Kosinski lucky in having found Ashby as director. Although the novel's political environment is East Coast, there is something about the Californian languor of Ashby's direction which suits its comic vision. There are undeniably two sides to Ashby's personality, which perhaps hover in uneasy alliance over *Being There*: the spaced-out humorist of *Harold and Maude*, headed for the acid observation of *The Last Detail*, and the blandly liberal commentator of *Shampoo* and *Coming Home*, pushing (or rather ambling after) the big statement. What holds them together here is probably Ashby's most focused talent, his editorial control. The result must be one of the boldest of commercial comedies, for the way it turns on passages of dead time, the dreadful pauses while other characters struggle to see the significance in each of Chance's cryptically meaningless remarks. Ashby, in fact, has so palpably created a mood to fit the stark outline of Kosinski's world that he makes one realise how uninhabitable, and fruitless, that world is, even in its brief fictional span.

Richard Combs, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1980

'Being There' Promotional Film

A three-minute promotional film with *Being There*'s director Hal Ashby.