

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

R.I.P., Peter Falk

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, June 30th, 2011



The first movie I ever went to floor with as producer was *Roommates*, which we shot in Pittsburgh in 1994. It was a summer of two great Peters – our director, Peter Yates, and our star, Peter Falk. Falk was to play a 106-year-old man, based on screenwriter Max Apple’s grandfather, who had raised Max after his parents died, and whose life the movie closely followed.

We assembled at the start of rehearsal for a table read of the script. I was familiar with table reads, having come from theatre in my first career. It is a good way for the cast to get to know each other, and to discover where the script needs some work. We were all there – both Peters, and the rest of our cast, Julianne Moore, Ellen Burstyn, D. B. Sweeney, Jan Rubes, Ernie Sabella, John Cunningham, the young Noah Fleiss.

We sat around a table in our production offices, on the 11th floor of the William Penn Hotel, and the reading started. Everyone had their script in front of them, and many of the actors had put yellow highlighter on their dialogue.

Peter Falk didn’t have any dialogue for the first 14 pages of the script, and he sat there with his eyes closed, tilted back on his chair. “Do you want a script, sir?” the 1st AD asked, but Falk didn’t move, seeming not to hear. By this point everyone was looking around the table with curiosity and perhaps some panic. Falk was 67 at the time – not old, certainly, but old enough the one might wonder about his mental health. We all knew stories of actors who worked past their ability to pull it off, and the enormous strain it put on other members of the cast.

Everyone was turning their pages in unison, as the scenes moved forward, getting nearer and near to that moment when Falk would have to say his line. The 1st AD opened the script to the page, and set it before Falk, respectfully. Now, with a simultaneous sound of paper bending, we turned to page 15.

Falk didn’t move. His eyes stayed closed, his chair stayed tilted. He said his line. Then, he said his next line.

Everyone read their script and turned pages except Falk, who had memorized every line already. The reading went like that for the next two hours. So did the whole shoot – Falk was ready every day.

Peter Falk was of a generation when actors could portray working class heroes with dignity. Like these characters, which he often played, he had a working class attitude toward his craft. He came in, was prepared, and did his job, with care for his craft and pride in his work. That's a legacy we'd all be proud to leave behind.

This video clip is from Wim Wenders' Wings of Desire, a film in which Peter Falk pretty much plays himself.

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