



Peter Rogers with Joan Sims on the set of 1963's *Nurse on Wheels*, which also starred Juliet Mills.

MR CARRY ON

... counting the pennies



Peter Rogers' remarkable work ethic led him to produce 31 Carry On films – on time and budget – and earn a reputation that wasn't always flattering or fair, say Steve O'Brien

When Carry On producer Peter Rogers died on April 14, 2009, he left behind a fortune that dwarfed that of the franchise's biggest stars. "I'll do anything for my actors," he once quipped, "except pay them." Though framed as a joke, there was a degree of truth there.

Notoriously tight-fisted with money (only in regard to filmmaking, it must be said – he drove a Rolls-Royce outside of work, which he upgraded every year), he famously paid his male stars £5,000 a movie. The actresses, even the top-tier ones such as Joan Sims and Barbara Windsor, were paid half that. When it came to filming, there was never any question of going abroad, even if the script was set overseas. For *Carry On Up The Khyber* (1968), Snowdonia doubled for India; for *Carry On Cowboy* (1965), Cobham Common in Surrey stood in for the Wild West. And why fly to the Sahara Desert for *Carry On Follow That Camel* (1967) when you've got Camber Sands on your doorstep? "A tree is a tree anywhere," he once remarked. "And it's only funny if someone falls out of it."

His reputation for penny-pinching preceded him. When Rogers met Frankie Howerd for the first time, he told the comedian that he'd injured his leg. Howerd responded by asking if he had tripped over his wallet.

For someone whose name was wedded to the epitome in gleefully low-brow, working-class culture, Peter Rogers certainly

enjoyed the high life. He thought there was nothing odd about launching his bargain counter comedies with lavish parties at London's Ivy restaurant, while home was an imposing mansion in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, which had previously been owned by Dirk Bogarde. When Rogers was interviewed by Roy Plomley for *Desert Island Discs*, he surprised its snobby host with his knowledge of classical music. Aside from his Rolls, Rogers also owned a Bentley and an assortment of other luxury cars. When he said, "I didn't see the point of spending money unnecessarily," he wasn't referring to his personal life.

BALANCING THE BOOKS

But is his reputation as a professional pinchfist deserved? Robert Ross, the official Carry On historian, begs to differ, stressing that the budgets allotted to the movies wasn't his money to begin with. "Peter had an agreed budget with which to deliver a film," he says. "It wasn't his money, so it was his job as producer to complete the production on or – ideally – under budget, and on schedule, and then hopefully make that budget back. Within that budget, Peter would pay himself a fee as producer; as well as receive a percentage, but the actors' agents could and would negotiate over fees. If an actor proved unwilling or, more likely, unavailable, Peter would re-cast."

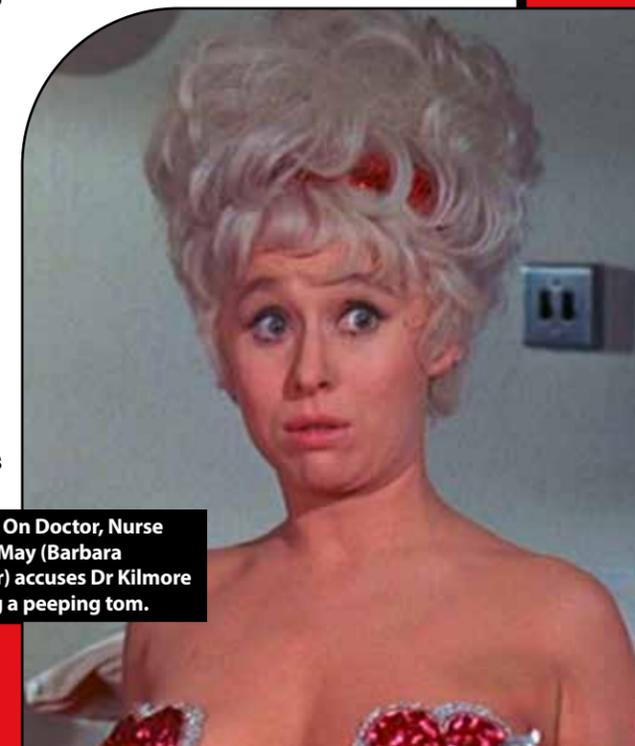
Early on in the franchise's run, Rogers offered the Carry On cast a choice between

accepting a percentage of the films' royalties or the standard Equity fee. To a man, every actor chose the latter.

He could certainly be ruthless. When, before the filming of sixth movie *Carry On Cruising* (1962), Charles Hawtrey demanded a star on his dressing room door and a salary hike, Rogers took little time in telling his actor he was no longer needed, and replaced him in the film with Lance Percival. "There was no question that Hawtrey was going to hold me to ransom," he said. (Hawtrey would return, tail between his legs, for the next movie, *Carry On Cabby*, 1963)

There's another story about Kenneth Williams asking for a car to take him to Pinewood Studios for a particularly early shoot for 1978's *Carry On Emmannuelle*. Rogers told him it could be done, but that £250 would be docked from his salary.

Yet Rogers was a producer who could be relied on to get things ➤



In *Carry On Doctor*, Nurse Sandra May (Barbara Windsor) accuses Dr Kilmore of being a peeping tom.

done, on time and on budget. At the height of the Carry On films' success, he and director Gerald Thomas were putting out two movies per year. By keeping the filming schedule to six weeks, and allowing around 10 weeks for post-production, it meant that Rogers and Thomas were able to deliver a Carry On film to cinemas within four months. Production line, these movies may have been, but they always looked impressive.

Gerald Thomas, who directed every film in the franchise, was as much a miracle worker as his partner, and many of those behind-the-scenes names were masters of their crafts. Alan Hume, who photographed over half the Carry Ons, also served as cinematographer on Return of the Jedi and Octopussy (both 1983), while Bert Davey, art director of Carry On Cleo (1964), went on to work on Superman III (1983) and Aliens (1986). And Anthony Wayne, assistant director on Carry On Jack (1964), produced Daniel Craig's first two James Bond films.

Compare the Carry Ons that were being made in the early Seventies to similar Britcom fare such as the Confessions... and Adventures... movies and they're like chalk and cheese in terms of production values. Cheap they were, but they never looked cheap.

A PERFECT PAIR

Rogers had first worked with Gerald Thomas on the 1956 B-picture Circus Friends. Within two years, they'd set themselves up as producer and director for the first movie in the Carry On series, Carry On Sergeant (1958). They would, together, work on 31 Carry On films and a smattering of other comedies, including 1960's Watch Your Stern and 1972's Bless This House feature. "The industry at large called them Rogers and Thommerstein," says Robert Ross, "as they were so tight and in-tune. Brothers in film-making."

"Gerald and Peter were joined at the hip," adds Andy Davidson, author of Carry On Confidential. "Peter maintained that a film would only ever be a true Carry On with Gerald behind the camera. Their relationship was much more than the sum of its parts."

Interestingly, Rogers' wife Betty Box, had a working relationship with Ralph Thomas, Gerald's brother. Together, they were responsible for what's arguably the only challenger to Carry On's comedy crown during the Sixties, the Doctor... series about the medical students of St Swithin's Hospital. Not that there was rivalry between the two franchises – Rogers even included a portrait of James Robertson Justice's character Sir Lancelot

Spratt from the Doctor... films in the background of 1967's Carry On Doctor.

The Carry On franchise came to a sorry end in 1978, with Carry On Emmanuelle. A grubby sex comedy that eschewed the cheeky innuendo of the Talbot Rothwell-penned films for more explicitly sexual jokes, it flopped at the box office. Various attempts throughout the Eighties to resuscitate the series – Carry On Texas, Carry On Down Under and Carry On Again Nurse were just three of the projects that were reported – proved unsuccessful. The series was finally revived, however, in 1992 courtesy of Monty Python producer John Goldstone. Though credited as 'executive producer', Rogers had little involvement with Carry On Columbus, and later recalled watching the rushes in disbelief. "I never laughed at our own comedies," he said, "but I knew they were funny. The more I saw of Columbus, the more depressed I became."

For the next 17 years, Rogers never gave up hope of making another Carry On film, even after Thomas' death in 1993. He had an office at Pinewood Studios that he still visited every day, festooned with pictures of his dogs and staffed by his loyal secretary, Audrey Skinner. At the time of his

death in 2009 he was planning a 32nd Carry On, with the working title of Carry On London. Sadly, the film, which was mooted to star Shane Richie and Vinnie Jones, never got further than pre-production.

In his will, Rogers, who had no children, left his entire £3.5 million estate to the Cinema & Television Benevolent Fund, a charity formed to help people in the film industry who had fallen on hard times.

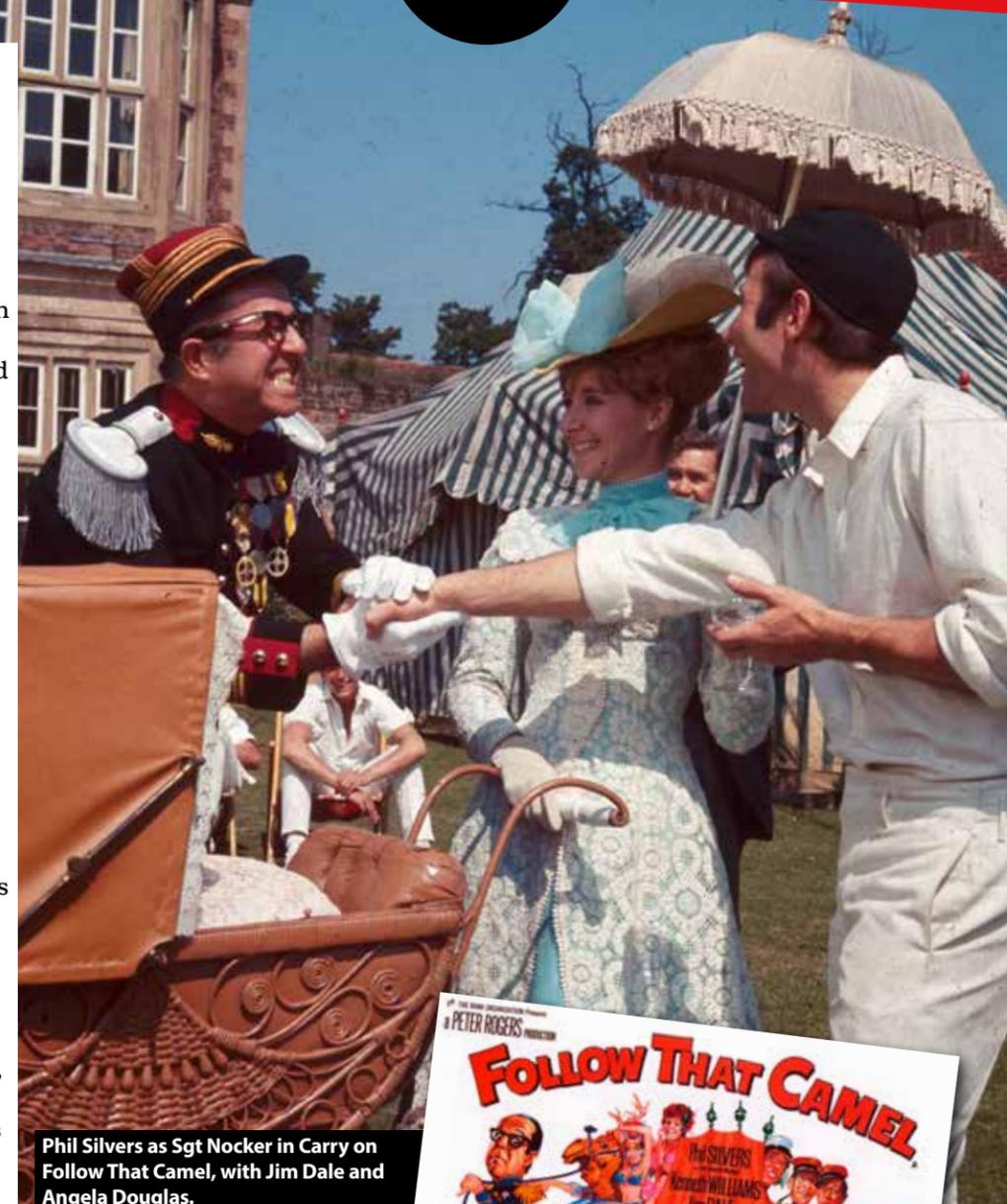
Peter Rogers may not have paid top dollar to his actors, but, Ross says, that's not the full story. "I've heard so many stories of Peter's unprompted and secret gifts and gestures over the years, to cast and crew alike. He was respected, admired and, yes, liked."

It's easy to caricature Peter Rogers as an ostentatious, money-grubbing movie maker, more interested in profit than product, but here was a man with a remarkable, dogged work ethic. It's hard to think of many producers who are still beaver away on new ideas at 95 years of age and it's a tragedy that that final dream project never came to fruition.

He was, says Ross, who knew him well in his final years, "a quiet, self-deprecating man, with a twinkling sense of wit. And he was always very happy to be known as Mr Carry On."

DID YOU KNOW?

Peter Rogers was the executive producer on ITV's Ivanhoe series, starring Roger Moore.



Phil Silvers as Sgt Nocker in Carry on Follow That Camel, with Jim Dale and Angela Douglas.



CARRY ON COUNTING

£74,000

Budget of the first film in the series, Carry On Sergeant.



51 Years that Peter Rogers was married to fellow producer Betty Box.

£15,000

Amount that Peter Rogers and Gerald Thomas received for each film (as well as one-third of the profits).



£30,000

Phil Silvers' fee for his one-off appearance in Carry On: Follow That Camel (the highest fee ever paid to an actor in a Carry On film).

£2,500,000

Budget of the final film in the series, Carry On Columbus.