

Peter Falk, Rumpled and Crafty Actor in Television's 'Columbo,' Dies at 83

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Peter Falk, who marshaled actorly tics, prop room appurtenances and his own physical idiosyncrasies to personify Columbo, one of the most famous and beloved fictional detectives in television history, died on Thursday night at his home in Beverly Hills, Calif. He was 83.

His death was announced in a statement from Larry Larson, a longtime friend and the lawyer for Mr. Falk's wife, Shera. He had been treated for Alzheimer's disease in recent years. Sleuth Peter Falk as Lieutenant Columbo. [More Photos »](#)

Mr. Falk had a wide-ranging career in comedy and drama, in the movies and onstage, before and during the three and a half decades in which he portrayed the unkempt but canny lead on "Columbo." He was nominated for two Oscars; appeared in original stage productions of works by Paddy Chayefsky, Neil Simon and Arthur Miller; worked with the directors Frank Capra, John Cassavetes, Blake Edwards and Mike Nichols; and co-starred with the likes of Frank Sinatra, Bette Davis and Jason Robards.

But Mr. Falk's prime-time popularity, like that of his contemporary Telly Savalas, of "Kojak" fame, was founded on a single role.

A lieutenant in the Los Angeles Police Department, Columbo was a comic variation on the traditional fictional detective. With the keen mind of Sherlock Holmes and Philip Marlowe, he was cast in the mold of neither — not a gentleman scholar, not a tough guy. He was instead a mass of quirks and peculiarities, a seemingly distracted figure in a rumpled raincoat, perpetually patting his pockets for a light for his signature stogie.

He drove a battered Peugeot, was unfailingly polite, was sometimes accompanied by a basset hound named Dog, and was constantly referring to the wisdom of his wife (who was never seen on screen) and a variety of relatives and acquaintances who were identified in Homeric-epithet-like shorthand — an uncle who played the bagpipes with the Shriners, say, or a nephew majoring in dermatology at U.C.L.A. — and who were called to mind by the circumstances of the crime at hand.

It was a low-rent affect that was especially irksome to the high-society murderers he outwitted in episode after episode. In the detective-story niche where Columbo lived, whodunit was hardly the point; the murder was committed and the murderer revealed in the show's opening minutes. How it was done was paramount. Typically, Columbo would string his suspects along, flattering them, apologizing profusely for continuing to trouble them with questions, appearing to have bought their alibis and, just before making an exit, nailing them with a final, damning query that he unfailingly introduced with the innocent-sounding phrase, "Just one more thing" It was the signal to viewers that the jig was up.

It was also the title of Mr. Falk's anecdotal memoir, published in 2006, in which he summarized the appeal of the show.

"What are you hanging around for?" he wrote, referring to the viewer. "Just one thing. You want to know how he gets caught."

Mr. Falk had a glass eye, resulting from an operation to remove a cancerous tumor when he was 3. The prosthesis gave all his characters a peculiar, almost quizzical squint. And he had a mild speech impediment that gave his "s" a breathy quality, a sound that emanated from the back of his throat and that seemed especially emphatic whenever, in character, he introduced himself as Lieutenant Columbo.

Such a deep well of eccentricity made Columbo amusing as well as incisive, not to mention a progenitor of later characters like Tony Shalhoub's Monk, and it made him a representative Everyman too. Off and on from 1968 to 2003, Mr. Falk played the character numerous times, often in the format of a 90-minute or 2-hour television movie. Each time Columbo, the ordinary man as hero, brought low a greedy and murderous privileged denizen of Beverly Hills, Malibu or Brentwood, it was an implicit victory for the many over the few.

"This is, perhaps, the most thoroughgoing satisfaction "Columbo" offers us," Jeff Greenfield wrote in The New York Times in 1973: "the assurance that those who dwell in marble and satin, those whose clothes, food, cars and mates are the very best, do not deserve it."

Peter Michael Falk was born in Manhattan on Sept. 16, 1927, and lived for a time in the Bronx, near Yankee Stadium, but grew up mostly in Ossining, N.Y., where his father owned a clothing store and where, in spite of his missing eye, he was a high school athlete. In one story he liked to tell, after being called out at third base during a baseball game, he removed his eye and handed it to the umpire.

"You'll do better with this," he said.

After high school Mr. Falk went briefly to Hamilton College, in upstate New York, before dropping out and joining the Merchant Marine as a cook. He later returned to New York City, where he earned a degree in political science from the New School for Social Research before attending Syracuse University, where he received a master's degree in public administration.

He took a job in Hartford as an efficiency expert for the Connecticut budget bureau. It was in Connecticut that he began acting, joining an amateur troupe called the Mark Twain Masquers in Hartford and taking classes from Eva Le Gallienne at the White Barn Theater in Westport. He was 29 when he decided to move to New York again, this time to be an actor.

He made his professional debut in an Off Broadway production of Molière's "Don Juan" in 1956. In 1957 he was cast as the bartender in the famous Circle in the Square revival of "The Iceman Cometh," directed by José Quintero and starring Jason Robards; he made his first splash on screen, as Abe Reles, a violent mob thug, in the 1960 film "Murder, Inc." That performance earned him an Oscar nomination for best supporting actor and a moment of high embarrassment at the awards ceremony. When the winner was announced — it was Peter Ustinov for "Spartacus" — Mr. Falk heard the first name and stood, only to have to sit back down again a moment later.

"When I hit the seat, I turned to the press agent and said, 'You're fired!' " Mr. Falk wrote in his memoir. "I didn't want him charging me for another day."

The next year, newly married to a Syracuse classmate, Alyce Mayo — they would have two daughters and divorce in 1976 — Mr. Falk again earned a supporting-actor Oscar nomination for playing a mobster, though this time with a more light-hearted stripe, in the final film to be directed by Frank Capra, "Pocketful of Miracles," starring Bette Davis and Glenn Ford.

From then on Mr. Falk, who was swarthy, squat (he was 5-foot-6) and handsome, had to fend off offers to play gangsters. He did take such a part in "Robin and the 7 Hoods," alongside Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Bing Crosby and Sammy Davis Jr., but fearful of typecasting, he also took roles in comic films like "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World" and "The Great Race";

He returned to the stage as well, as Stalin, the title role, in Paddy Chayefsky's "Passion of Josef D," which earned him solid reviews in spite of the show's brief run (less than two weeks). Mr. Falk played Stalin with brilliant, unsmiling ferocity; Howard Taubman wrote in his largely positive review in The Times.

His life was forever changed in 1967 when, reportedly after both Bing Crosby and Lee J. Cobb turned down the role, he was cast as Columbo in the television film "Prescription: Murder." The story, about a psychiatrist who kills his wife with the help of one of his patients, was written by Richard Levinson and William Link; they had adapted it from their stage play, which opened in San Francisco and Boston in 1964, and which itself was an adaptation. Mr. Levinson and Mr. Link first wrote the story in 1960 for a series called "The Chevy Mystery Show." It was in that show — the episode was titled "Enough Rope" — that Columbo made his debut as a character, played by Bert Freed.

But it was Mr. Falk who made him a legend. During the filming it was he who rejected the fashionable attire the costume shop had laid out for him; it was he who chose the raincoat — one of his own — and who matched the rest of the detective's clothes to its shabbiness. It was he who picked out the Peugeot from the studio motor pool, a convertible with a flat tire and needing a paint job that, he reflected years afterward, "even matched the raincoat."

And as the character grew, the line between the actor and the role grew hazier. They shared a general disregard for nattiness, an informal mode of speech, an obsession with detail, an irrepressible absent-mindedness. Even Columbo's favorite song, "This Old Man," which seemed to run through his mind (and the series) like a broken record, was one that Mr. Falk had loved from childhood and that ended up in the show because he was standing around humming it one day, in character, when Columbo was waiting for someone to come to the phone.

Three years passed between the first "Columbo" movie and the second, "Ransom for a Dead Man," which became the pilot that turned the show into a regular network offering. It was part of a revolving

wheel of Sunday night mysteries with recurring characters that appeared under the rubric "NBC Mystery Theater." The first set included "McCloud," with Dennis Weaver, and "McMillan and Wife," with Rock Hudson and Susan Saint James.

In between, Mr. Falk made "Husbands," the first of his collaborations with his friend Cassavetes. The others were "A Woman Under the Influence," in 1974, a brutally realistic portrayal of a marriage undermined by mental illness, directed by Cassavetes, for which Mr. Falk's co-star and Cassavetes's wife, Gena Rowlands, was nominated for an Academy Award; and "Mikey and Nicky" in 1976, a dark buddy film directed by Elaine May in which the two men played the title roles.

In 1971 he once again returned to Broadway, in Neil Simon's angry comedy "The Prisoner of Second Avenue."

In later years Mr. Falk starred in several notable films — among them "Murder by Death" (1976), "The In-Laws" (1979), "The Princess Bride" (1987), "Tune In Tomorrow" (1990) and "Wings of Desire" (1987), in which he played himself, contemplating his acting career — and in 1998 he opened Off Broadway in the title role of Arthur Miller's play "Mr. Peters' Connections," a portrait of an older man trying to make sense out of his life as it comes to an end. By that time, however, Mr. Falk and Columbo had become more or less interchangeable as cultural references. Mr. Peters, Ben Brantley wrote in his review of the play in The Times, "is as genuinely perplexed as Columbo, his aggressively rumpled television detective, only pretends to be."

Mr. Falk, who began sketching as a way to while away time on movie sets, had had many gallery shows of his charcoal drawings and watercolors. He is survived by his second wife, the former Shera Danese, and his two daughters, Jackie and Catherine.

For all the mysteries Columbo solved, one remains. Many viewers claim that in one or more episodes Columbo's police identification is visible with the first name "Frank" visibly scrawled on it. However, the character was initially created without a first name; an exhaustive book about the television show, "The Columbo Phile," does not give a first name, and Mr. Falk, for his part, was no help in this regard. Whenever he was asked Columbo's first name, his response was the same.

"Lieutenant," he said.

(The New York Times)