

ONE WAY PENDULUM

“...and even your own counsel has to admit that not only were you as drunk as a wheelbarrow, but that you were quite incapable of falling flat on your face when asked to do so.”

Prosecuting Counsel (Graham Crowden)

Having honed his craft as assistant to Tony Richardson on Woodfall productions *The Entertainer* and *A Taste of Honey*, Peter Yates graduated to the director's chair himself with *Cliff Richard smash Summer Holiday* (1963) then returned to the fold for his bizarre second feature, *One Way Pendulum*. Having directed the original Royal Court theatre production of N.F. “Wally” Simpson's absurdist play, subtitled *A Farce In A New Dimension*, Yates was the obvious choice to take charge of the film version; in usual Woodfall style, Simpson himself was chosen to write the adaptation. The resulting picture,

however, stands as a weird and obscure outlier in the company's filmography. Shot mainly on studio sets rather than existing locations (the trademark Woodfall mode), this surreal, deadpan celebration of British eccentricity would prove the company's sole attempt at all-out comedy—with the possible exception of *Joseph Andrews*.

And while it now looks like an inadvertent companion-piece to its near-exact contemporary, Richard Lester's *The Knack ...and How To Get It*—both revolve around bizarre high-jinks going on in an ordinary-looking residence—the impact upon critics, audiences and festivals was the diametric opposite of that enjoyed by its Palme d'Or-winning stablemate. *The Knack*, also adapted from a Royal Court hit, is regarded as perhaps the cinematic quintessence of mid-sixties Swinging London. As its title implies, *One Way Pendulum*—despite boasting a truly remarkable cast comprised mainly of middle-aged character-actors—swings in an altogether more offbeat manner. Indeed, it stands as an invaluable reminder that the Suez-and-after British society chronicled in plays like Osborne's *The Entertainer* and *Look Back In Anger* contained beneath respectable surfaces a wide streak of anarchic freakishness.

Mild-mannered office-worker Arthur Groomkirby (Eric Sykes) devotes his free time to an unusual form of DIY entertainment, using elaborate kits supplied by the ‘Build It Yourself’ company. Having previously essayed such ambitious constructions as the Great Wall of China, Arthur now manages to somehow conjure up the courtroom of the Old Bailey (part of this fascinating organisation's ‘Famous Institutions’ series), complete with personnel. The fact that the latter look exactly like individuals with whom he interacts in his workplace is the most obvious clue that the events depicted should not be taken too literally...

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With various other manifestations of oddball behaviour going on elsewhere in the Groomkirby house—sweet-natured Aunt Mildred (Mona Washbourne) believes herself to be a passenger on a train to the Scottish Highlands—Arthur becomes engrossed in the Old Bailey trial. The defendant: his own son Kirby Groomkirby, a normal-looking but mute young man played in proto-Mr Bean style by none other than prodigious polymath Jonathan Miller, fresh from *Beyond the Fringe*. Accused of a string of murders, Kirby is obsessed with his collection of purloined I-Speak-Your-Weight weighing machines, which he trains to sing—an eerie fore-echo of Miller’s later career as a world-renowned opera director.

The Groomkirby trial, which takes up most of *One Way Pendulum*’s second half, is surely the most outlandish court-case ever committed to celluloid, a compendium of lunatic convolutions—many of them revolving around the obscure County Durham town of Chester-le-Street, of all places—overseen in magnificently unflappable style by Douglas Wilmer’s phlegmatic judge. Wilmer, like everyone else in the expert cast, plays Simpson’s wild dialogue straight as a poker, director Yates avoiding that common 1960s error of zaniness for zaniness’s sake.

In the words of author Jonathan Coe, Simpson (“Britain’s greatest post-war absurdist playwright”) is “truly radical, in that [he] refuses to take anything seriously at all. His relentless absurdity has begun to seem much closer to reality than anything the kitchen-sink playwrights came up with.” *One Way Pendulum* “combined the rarefied absurdism of Ionesco with the downtrodden melancholy of the suburban sitcom.”

Yates’s film was, sadly, the first and last big-screen Simpson adaptation. Wally’s influence on other media, however, would prove considerable and enduring, most spectacularly and subversively, in the iconoclastic comedy of the Monty Python team, *The Goodies* and later *The Young Ones*. *One Way Pendulum*’s leading man would also star in and write his own eponymous and long-running BBC series, *Sykes* (1972-1979), whose quirkier contours often bear a distinct Simpsonian imprint.

Simpson himself often wrote for television in the 1960s and 1970s, including an unlikely return to the legal arena with a characteristically maverick contribution to the otherwise somewhat staid ITV series *Crown Court*. *An Upward Fall* (1977) imagined a home for senior citizens located at the summit of a Himalayan mountain with the conveniences somewhat inconveniently sited thousands of feet below. As for Yates, he would come to Hollywood’s attention via the gritty Stanley Baker vehicle *Robbery* (1967), deliver the most famous car-chase in cinema history with *Bullitt* (1968), and go on to such classics as *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1973), *Breaking Away* (1979) and *The Dresser* (1983). The latter provided a happy reunion with Albert Finney, whose film-debut in *The Entertainer* he had overseen for Woodfall some 23 years before.