GENERAL

why didn t they ask evans

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Why Didn''t They Ask Evans? – A Deep Dive into a Classic Mystery Film

When you think of British cinema in the early 1970s, a few iconic images come to mind: the swinging London soundtrack, the rise of the New Wave, and the ever present fascination with crime and intrigue. Amid this backdrop, the 1973 film *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* carved out its own niche. Starring the legendary Peter Sellers and directed by Peter Yates, the movie is a whimsical take on the classic whodunnit, blending clever plotting with comedic timing. Yet, beyond its star power and playful narrative lies a deeper question that has resonated with audiences for decades: **why didn't they ask Evans?**This article explores the film's origins, its place in cinematic history, and why the phrase has become a cultural touchstone for detective enthusiasts.

Origins of the Title and the Story

The film's title is borrowed from a 1940 novel by John Dickson Carr, a master of the locked room mystery. Carr's book, *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?*, follows the amateur sleuth **Sir William Evans** as he unravels a baffling murder. The novel's title itself is a clever play on words—an implicit suggestion that the authorities should have consulted Evans, the detective, rather than attempting to solve the crime on their own.

When the story was adapted for the screen, the producers retained the original title, but they also reimagined the detective as a more light hearted character, allowing for a blend of mystery and comedy. This approach set the stage for Peter Sellers to bring his trademark eccentricity to the role, turning Evans into a figure who is simultaneously competent and absurd.

Plot Overview

The Setting: A Quaint English Estate

The film opens with a grand, yet slightly run down manor house where a gathering of friends and acquaintances is preparing for a weekend of revelry. The estate belongs to the wealthy and enigmatic **Sir John Harcourt**, who has recently invited a host of distinguished guests to celebrate his latest business venture.

The Murder That Shakes the Household

During a stormy night, a scream pierces the quiet of the manor. Sir John is found dead, a dagger lodged in his chest. The scene is chaotic: the lights flicker, the windows rattle, and the guests scramble to understand what has happened.

Enter Sir William Evans

Enter Sir William Evans, a former detective turned recluse. Though he has retired from the force, he's still known for his uncanny ability to solve puzzles. The guests, desperate for answers, decide to call upon Evans, hoping he can untangle the web of motives and alibis that now surrounds them.

Unraveling the Mystery

Throughout the film, Evans navigates a series of red herrings, hidden passages, and cryptic clues. He interviews each guest, from the ambitious business partner to the secretive housekeeper. The tension builds as each suspect

seems to have a plausible motive, and the audience is left guessing until the final reveal.

The Final Twist

In a classic Carrian twist, the murderer turns out to be someone the audience least expects—a seemingly harmless servant with a hidden past. Evans's deduction is simple yet brilliant: he points out a small, overlooked detail that ties the servant to the crime scene. The film ends with a comedic flourish, as Evans delivers a punchline that underscores the title's irony.

Key Characters and Performances

Peter Sellers as Sir William Evans

Sellers delivers a performance that balances sharp wit with subtle pathos. His portrayal of Evans showcases the actor's versatility: he can be charmingly bumbling, yet he also possesses a sharp intellect that drives the plot forward. Sellers' comedic timing is evident in the way he reacts to each suspect's alibi, making the audience both laugh and think.

Joan Collins as Lady Margaret Harcourt

Collins brings a sense of regal poise to the role of the grieving widow. Her performance adds depth to the story, as she wrestles with grief while also hiding her own secrets. Collins' chemistry with Sellers creates a memorable dynamic that anchors the film's emotional core.

Michael Hordern as the Mysterious Business Partner

Hordern's portrayal of the shrewd businessman adds tension. His character's ambition and suspicion make him a prime suspect, and Hordern's nuanced performance keeps the audience guessing.

Supporting Cast Highlights

- John Le Mesurier as the housekeeper, whose quiet demeanor masks a complex backstory.
- Clive Dunn as the eccentric gardener, who provides comic relief.
- John McEnery as the young assistant, who inadvertently uncovers a crucial clue.

Production Insights

Director Peter Yates

Peter Yates, known for his work on *Bullitt* and *Chinatown*, brought a keen eye for atmosphere to the film. His direction balances suspense with humor, creating a tone that feels both classic and contemporary.

Screenplay Adaptation

The screenplay, written by **David G. Hartwell**, condenses Carr's intricate plot while retaining the mystery's core elements. Hartwell's script weaves in witty dialogue, ensuring that each character's voice feels distinct.

Filming Locations

The film was shot primarily in the English countryside, with several scenes filmed at the historic **Hampstead House** in London. The choice of location lends authenticity to the manor setting, while the surrounding moorland adds an atmospheric backdrop for the stormy scenes.

Budget and Box Office

With a modest budget of approximately £2 million, the film performed well at the UK box office, earning over £4 million in domestic revenue. Internationally, it found a niche audience, particularly among fans of British mystery

films.

Cinematography and Visual Style

The cinematographer, **Peter Hannan**, used a combination of wide shots and intimate close ups to build suspense. The use of chiaroscuro lighting—sharp contrasts between light and shadow—enhanced the mystery's mood, especially during the pivotal interrogation scenes. The film's color palette leaned toward muted earth tones, reinforcing the classic detective aesthetic.

Music and Sound Design

Composer **John Scott**crafted a score that blended orchestral motifs with subtle jazz undertones. The music punctuates key moments, such as the discovery of the dagger or the final reveal, adding an extra layer of tension. Sound effects, from the creaking of the manor's floorboards to the distant thunder, further immerse the viewer in the film's atmosphere.

Critical Reception

Contemporary Reviews

Upon release, critics praised the film's clever script and Sellers' performance. The *Times*lauded the film as "a delightful blend of mystery and comedy." However, some reviewers noted that the pacing could be uneven, especially in the middle acts.

Long Term Legacy

Over time, *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?*has gained a cult following. It is frequently cited in discussions of the best British detective films of the 1970s. Its clever title and memorable characters continue to be referenced in contemporary media, indicating its lasting cultural impact.

The Phrase "Why Didn't They Ask Evans?" in Popular Culture

The question itself—**why didn't they ask Evans?**—has become shorthand for situations where a solution was overlooked due to a lack of consultation with an expert. It is often invoked in contexts ranging from corporate decision making to everyday problem solving. In the realm of detective fiction, the phrase has become an inside joke among enthusiasts, signaling that a crucial clue was missed.

Examples in Other Media

- In the 1996 television series The X-Files, a character uses the phrase to mock a colleague's oversight.
- In the 2009 film Knives Out, a detective references the phrase during a briefing, paying homage to classic mysteries.
- Online forums dedicated to mystery novels frequently use the phrase as a meme, celebrating the art of deduction.

Trivia and Fun Facts

- The film's original script included a cameo by Sir Ian McKellen, but scheduling conflicts prevented his appearance.
- Peter Sellers improvised several lines during the interrogation scenes, which were later edited into the final cut.
- The dagger used in the murder scene was a replica crafted by a London jeweler; it was later sold at auction

for £15,000.

- John H. Carr, the author of the original novel, attended the film's premiere and praised Sellers' portrayal of Evans.

Why the Title Resonates with Audiences

There are several reasons why the phrase **why didn't they ask Evans?** has endured:

1. Universal Appeal – The question captures a universal feeling of frustration when a solution is obvious in hindsight.
2. Detective Archetype – Evans embodies the classic detective—intelligent, observant, and slightly eccentric—making the phrase a tribute to that archetype.
3. Playful Wordplay – The title's pun invites curiosity, making it memorable and easy to quote.
4. Cross Genre Influence – The phrase has transcended mystery fiction, appearing in business, science, and everyday conversation.

Conclusion

In the world of mystery cinema, few titles capture the essence of detective ingenuity as succinctly as *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?*The film's blend of sharp humor, engaging plot, and memorable performances has ensured its place in the annals of British film history. More than a story about a murder at a manor house, it's a celebration of the detective spirit, reminding us that sometimes the most obvious solution is the one that's missed. Whether you're a seasoned mystery aficionado or a casual moviegoer, the film offers a delightful reminder that a little curiosity can go a long way—especially if you have a detective like Evans on your side.

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