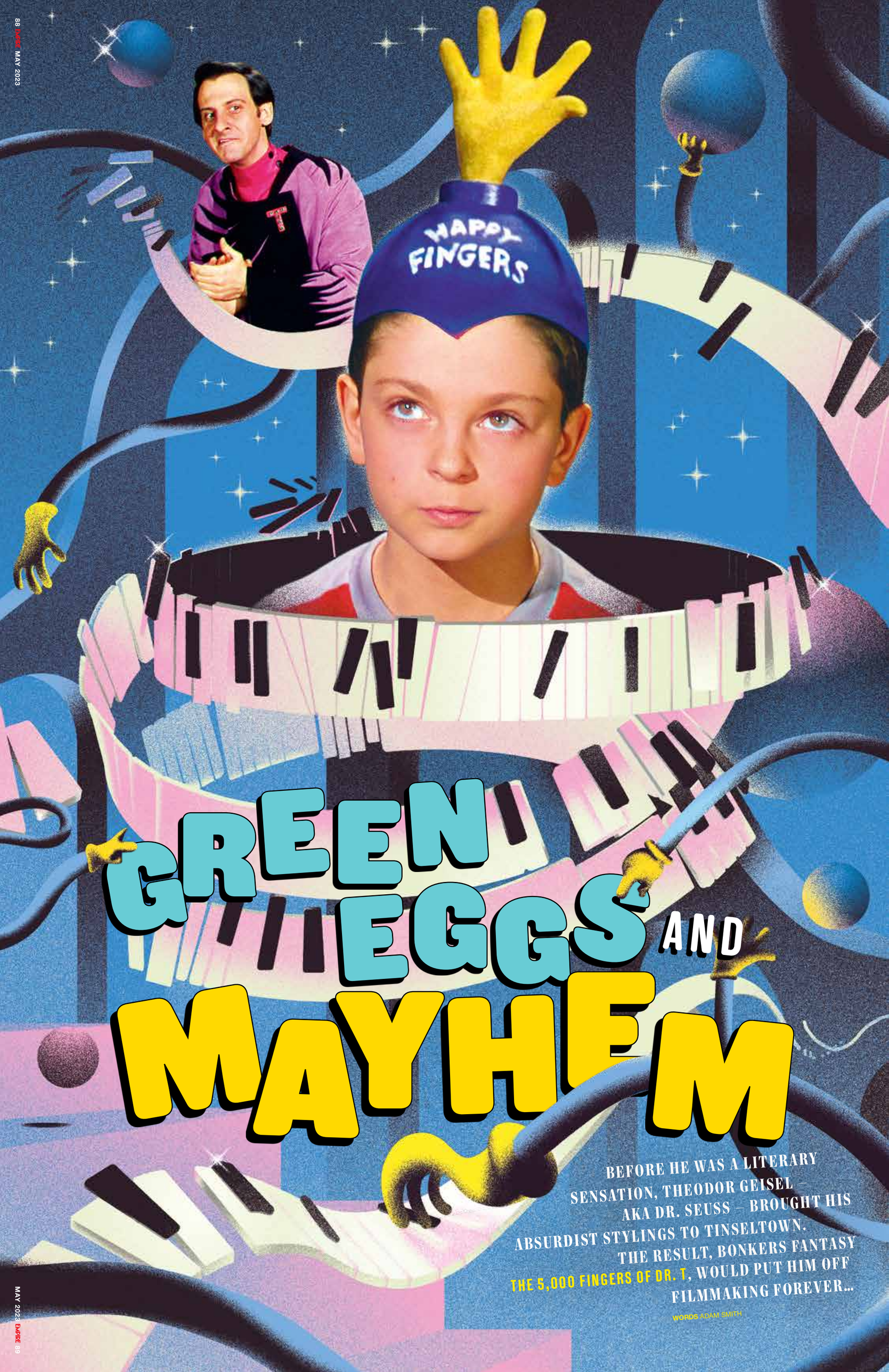


GREEN EGGS AND MAYHEM

BEFORE HE WAS A LITERARY SENSATION, THEODOR GEISEL AKA DR. SEUSS – BROUGHT HIS ABSURDIST STYLINGS TO TINSELTOWN. THE RESULT, BONKERS FANTASY THE 5,000 FINGERS OF DR. T, WOULD PUT HIM OFF FILMMAKING FOREVER...

WORDS ADAM SMITH











Left: Piano-lesson-hater Bart (Tommy Rettig) in his yellow-fingered beanie — reminiscent of another famous Bart. **Above:** Theodor Geisel and production designer Rudolph Sternad review sketches for the film.



The commencement address was, until relatively recently, a uniquely American phenomenon. Each fall, at colleges and universities across the United States, deans of degrees scour alumni lists, call contacts, rack their brains in search of a celebrity, a politician, a half-successful businessman or a second-fiddle astronaut with alimony debts, to deliver inspirational homilies to that year's departing students.

It was always thus, but in 1977 Eugene Hotchkiss III, the President Emeritus of Lake Forest College, a private liberal arts college just north of Chicago, found himself with an unusual problem. He had landed his speaker at the last minute: an artist and writer by the name of Theodor Geisel, who had been lured to the campus with the promise of an honourary degree. But Geisel, who was turning out to be a mildly eccentric character, had not actually committed to saying anything in return. The *quid pro quo* of the arrangement was apparently lost on him. Until the last minute, Hotchkiss had been worried that Geisel might trouser his degree and depart without saying anything at all.

But, as the grey-haired, 73-year-old man shuffled to the front of the stage and finally pulled from his pocket a small piece of paper, Hotchkiss sighed with relief. The young audience was obviously rapt. Because to them Geisel was known by another name, Dr. Seuss, and his books — *The Cat In The Hat*, *Green Eggs And Ham*, *How The Grinch Stole Christmas* — were as much a part of the scaffolding of an American childhood as milk, cookies and the Pledge Of Allegiance. It was not an exaggeration to say that for many of these students about to depart the world of letters, Dr. Seuss was the man who had taught them to read.

Geisel announced the title of his speech — "My Uncle Terwilliger On The Art Of Eating Popovers" — and proceeded to deliver one of the strangest commencement addresses in the history of the form. At 14 lines long it is certainly the only such speech short enough to be memorialised, in full, on a small plaque which still adorns a rock on the college's leafy campus to this day.

The most remarkable thing about it, though, is the title. Or rather, the name. As perhaps only the most clued-up graduates of the film-studies department might have noticed, Terwilliger — or to be exact, Terwilliker — is the moniker of the villain in *The 5,000 Fingers Of Dr. T*, Geisel's one and only Hollywood movie. The experience of making it had been so bruising, so utterly catastrophic, that Geisel had sworn shortly after to never speak of it. It was a vow that, with the exception of that speech, he kept until his death.

But on this single occasion, he had decided to address, albeit in a kind of code, the film that had put a sudden, brutal end to his moviemaking career: a film which is still, to this day, one of the batshit-craziest movies ever released by a Hollywood studio.



Facing page, top to bottom: Dr. Terwilliker (Hans Conried) and Heloise (Mary Healy) at the controls; The surreal world of Bart's dream; Dr. T. in the frame; A beard swing, of course — hair attached to twin-brother actors Jack and Robert Heasley; Some of the 500 boys who will provide the 5,000 fingers required to play Dr. T's gargantuan piano.

PUKE. PUKE EVERYWHERE.

Puke on the *ceiling*. Puke on the *floor*. Puke on the piano, the windows and *door*.

It is March of 1952, the largest soundstage on the Columbia lot, and observing this vomitous calamity from a safe distance is Theodor Geisel. His beautiful grand-piano set, a vast curving keyboard — like something out of a Salvador Dalí painting — with space for 500 ten-year-old boys, is drenched in sick.

As he watched the pre-teens being mopped and scrubbed, his glorious creation doused with detergent and disinfectant, Geisel might have pondered the wisdom of abandoning the comfort and safety of his drawing board for the tribulations of big-budget movie-making. His first encounter with Hollywood was not shaping up well. And it would only get worse.

The scene being shot was part of *The 5,000 Fingers Of Dr. T*'s complicated denouement. Captured by the titular maniacal musician, the lads were supposed to hammer out a tune under his demonic tutelage, but someone had paid them early, and they had all decamped to a nearby hotdog stand and gorged. The result had been a synchronised upchuck. "The critics," Geisel said shortly after release, "would later react in the same manner."

Geisel's unexpected journey to Hollywood had begun during the war. By the early 1940s he was a wildly successful commercial artist, though his book-writing career had not yet exploded in the way it would in the mid 1950s. During the war he had joined 'Fort Fox', a division of creative types headed by Frank Capra, which produced educational films for the US Army. Under Capra's tutelage, and working alongside the likes of Looney Tunes veteran Chuck Jones, he had learned the skills of screenwriting and filmmaking. "Jones taught him how to storyboard, and to think in beats," Geisel's biographer Brian Jay Jones tells *Empire*. "You know, that Wile E. Coyote hangs in the air precisely 25 frames before falling into the canyon. Capra taught him how to write a script, to strike out anything that didn't advance the story. It was a perfect relationship."

Geisel and Chuck Jones' Private Snafu films, educational shorts which trained soldiers on everything from truck maintenance to how to dodge venereal disease, were smash hits with their khaki-clad audience. A number of post-war documentaries on which Geisel worked even won Oscars, making him a hot property in Hollywood.

Producer Stanley Kramer suggested he write a feature, paying him a then stratospheric $35,000 for his screenplay: a strange, surreal tale of a boy, Bart (to be played by child star Tommy Rettig), whose mother (played by club singer Mary Healy) is captured and enslaved by a Mephistophelean piano teacher played by veteran radio actor Hans Conried, whose richly camp performance remains the film's highlight. Thrown into the mix is a hapless plumber (played by Healy's real-life husband and performing partner Peter Lind Hayes), a potential father figure for Bart.

But this bare-bones description doesn't do the story's militant oddness justice: the whole thing is shot through with a kind of nuclear paranoia (an 'atomic noise sucker' is a kind of doomsday device that channelled the nuclear panic already gripping the post-war West); there's an unexpected homosexual subtext, with Terwilliker showing much more interest in the blandly handsome plumber than he does in Bart's mother. And the theme of absent fathers being replaced adds a further Freudian fizz. It is, in short, *weird*.

Though Geisel didn't know it, his movie had landed at ground zero in a feud between Kramer and Columbia head Harry Cohn. "Kramer was an enterprising and daring producer," veteran film critic and *Dr. T* enthusiast Leonard Maltin tells *Empire*. "He ›

treated audiences' intelligence seriously. He respected them." Cohn, on the other hand, was a naked populist, and, his enemies would say, a shameless vulgarian. He was famed for taking a hatchet to movies that failed his 'ass test'. "I have a foolproof device for judging whether a picture is good or bad," he is supposed to have once said. "If my fanny squirms, it's bad. If my fanny doesn't squirm, it's good. It's as simple as that."

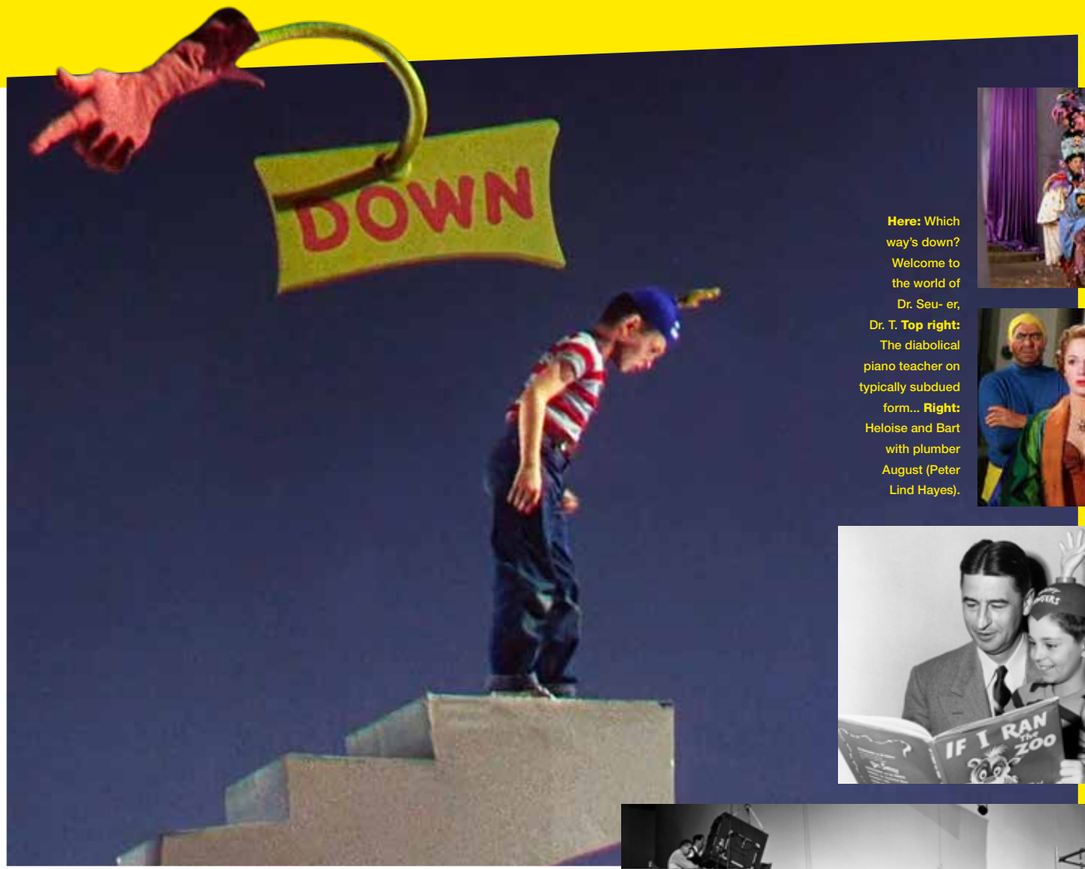
Thus the shooting of *Dr. T* was fraught from the start. Kramer had been barred from directing the movie himself by Cohn, and had appointed Roy Rowland, a studio journeyman at best and one ill-suited to the fantastical material. The budget, a not insubstantial for the times $1 million, was insufficient for Geisel's grand vision and had been nearly tripled when, appalled by suggested set-design cost-cutting and changes to the script he considered "vulgar", he had threatened to walk away. Meanwhile, Cohn and his team of executives interfered constantly, sending Kramer and Geisel voluminous and unwanted notes. "The thing Geisel hated about *Dr. T* was that it soon became writing by committee," says Brian Jay Jones. "It was a misery for him from day one."

IN JANUARY 1953, Geisel attended the first preview screening of *The 5,000 Fingers Of Dr. T*. It was, he would later remember privately, "the worst evening of my life". Fifteen minutes after the lights dimmed, the first audience members began to trickle out. After an hour it had become a tsunami. "At the end there was only one boy left," Leading man Hans Conried is quoted as saying by biographer Suzanne Gargiulo. "And he was waiting for his mother to pick him up."

Kramer decamped to the editing bay and began frantically revising the movie. Half of Geisel's beloved songs hit the cutting-room floor. As much of the film's weirdness as could be excised was, replaced with a more wholesome tale of a boy pining for a father figure, which Kramer structured out of the existing footage. New opening scenes and a coda set, reassuringly, in present-day suburbia were shot and cut into the film. Conried, whose movie-career hopes were pinned on the project, watched from afar and voiced what Geisel no doubt thought. "It was a great, beautiful picture [but] it was mutilated and cut with a broken beer bottle," he lamented. "They made some really bad judgement calls," says Leonard Maltin. "These were really touching and imaginative songs that I think would have helped the movie find an audience."

"At this point, I think Seuss just threw up his arms and said, 'Fuck you,'" says Brian Jay Jones. "The songs were where he'd really put his heart and soul." But even in its butchered form, *Dr. T* was still one of the oddest, most alarming films ever to confront Columbia's marketing department. They might have been expecting a family fantasy akin to *The Wizard Of Oz*. What they had was a Freudian nightmare, shot through with nuclear panic.

A major marketing effort was pulled at the last minute, likely as a result of the increasingly virulent turf war between Cohn and Kramer, while the marketing pack the studio sent to theatre owners was not so much a coherent publicity strategy as a barely stifled scream of existential despair. "Invite the music teachers in town to a music teacher's screening!" they advised. Given that Terwilliker is the villain of the piece, this is akin to organising a screening of *Bambi* for deer hunters.





The film barely dented the box office. Reviews were lukewarm — "strange and confused" was the *New York Times*' Bosley Crowther's unenthusiastic verdict, while *Variety* declared that it was "hard to keep the interest from lagging" — and the reaction from the public a shrug. Geisel refused to watch the butchered cut and began the process of forgetting the film, expunging it from his record. "What's interesting is that while it's an anomaly in his career, it's not a takedown," says Brian Jay Jones. "It was never, 'Dr. Seuss is finished.' It just doesn't go on his record, really." (Geisel would no doubt be delighted that, even today, his *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry omits the film entirely.)

And so *The 5,000 Fingers Of Dr. T* began to fade from the public consciousness almost immediately after its half-hearted release. "These days it truly is a cult film," says Jones. "Even people who know a lot about film, you mention it and you just get a blank face. People just forgot that the movie ever existed. I mean, when I started writing the biography even I didn't know that it existed."





Here: Which way's down? Welcome to the world of Dr. Seu- er, Dr. T. **Top right:** The diabolical piano teacher on typically subdued form... **Right:** Heloise and Bart with plumber August (Peter Lind Hayes).

Left: Geisel and Rettig enjoying a Dr. Seuss classic, *If I Ran The Zoo*. **Below left:** Myriad crew on set for another piece of spectacular staging, as Dr. T lords it over his junior musicians.



Above left: Doing the Bart, man. **Right:** Popping bright colours and distorted dimensions strikingly evoke beloved Dr. Seuss books, most illustrated by Geisel himself. **Right:** Pickle juice, anyone? Dr. T's beverage *du choix*.





Alamy, Mary Evans, Powerhouse Films

For Geisel, the experience had undoubtedly been genuinely painful, and he kept to his word, refusing to talk about it on the rare occasion he was asked. Perhaps, after he had become a household name, he wondered about what might have been. "The balance of power might have been different five years later and it certainly would have been ten years later," says Maltin. "When the Seuss name became one that really sold books, it would have sold movie tickets too."

FOR THOSE WHO had been involved in *The 5,000 Fingers Of Dr. T*'s chaotic creation, careers went on, petered out, ended. For Hans Conried, the prolific radio thesp who had hoped the role would finally launch his film career, the disappointment over what had happened lingered for the rest of his life. "He looked back on it with great frustration and regret," says Maltin, who interviewed Conried shortly before his death in 1982. "He had seen a great opportunity in playing Terwilliker and he had seized it. He was mournful even years later that it hadn't turned out the way he hoped it would."

But you can't put something that eccentric, unique and twisted out into the universe without it making ripples, without it touching someone. And in the case of *The 5,000 Fingers Of Dr. T*, one of the people who obviously encountered it at some point, and who never forgot it, was an aspiring animator named Matt Groening.

The Simpsons' debts to Geisel's cinematic debacle are, once you start looking for them, difficult to miss. There's Bart, who shares not only a first name with *Dr. T*'s protagonist, but whose head — yellow with its spiky, skywards-oriented hair — bears a striking resemblance to his cinematic forbear, clad in his yellow, five-fingered beanie. There's Springfield, also the name of Geisel's hometown. In one of the show's most obvious homages, in the Season 6 episode 'Two Dozen And One Greyhounds', Mr. Burns dresses while singing the ditty 'See My Vest' ("See my loafers? Former gophers/It was that or skin my chauffeurs"), which bears a likely entirely uncoincidental resemblance to Dr. T.'s dressing-song 'Do-Mi-Do-Duds' ("I want my organdy snood and in addition to that/I want my chiffon Mother Hubbard lined with Hudson Bay rat").

And if all this is merely circumstantial, may we offer into evidence Bart's nemesis: Sideshow Bob. Or, to give him his full name, Dr. Robert Underdunk Terwilliger. It's a succulent fact that the most visible remaining evidence of one of the great forgotten disasters of entertainment history is in one of its most beloved, and longest-lived, successes. Geisel, whose humour always tended towards the dark and chaotic, might have relished the irony.

And happier times were around the corner. In 1954 Geisel was commissioned to write a reading primer. The result, *The Cat In The Hat*, was a publishing sensation, kickstarting a career that would establish his name as a global brand, sell 600 million books (and counting), and finally land him a Pulitzer Prize shortly before his death, aged 87, in 1991.

But even at the height of his success, he clearly still sometimes remembered *Dr T.*. And on that autumn day at Lake Forest College, in the final lines of his poetic address, he made his feelings about it, and Hollywood, as clear as he ever would. "And as you partake of the world's bill of fare/That's darned good advice to follow/Do a lot of spitting out the hot air/And be careful what you swallow."

SEUSS ON SCREEN

TRACKING THE GOOD DOCTOR'S CELLULOID UPS AND DOWNS — SEUSSILY



HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS (2000)
At the dawn of the century, producers set sail,
To conjure a film from a Dr. Seuss tale.
The tale of a grouch, who was funny, yet scary,
Played by a heavily made-up Jim Carrey.
The performance was ace— but not a big ask,
For Jim had nailed 'shouty and green' in *The Mask*.



THE CAT IN THE HAT (2003)
When *The Grinch* was a hit, Hollywood formed a plan:
"Another Seuss book, and a *new* funny man!"
For the nearest soundstage, they made a fast bee-line,
With Mike Myers dressed as a titfer-topped feline.
But oh dear — disaster! The film was a mess,
Check Rotten Tomatoes... just ten per cent fresh.



HORTON HEARS A WHO! (2008)
Carrey returned for this cartoony caper,
Alongside the boss of Dunder Mifflin Paper.
Carell, Amy Poehler, Seth Rogen and more,
The voice-acting talent was simply top-drawer.
Critics and crowds both went wild with elation,
Singing the praise of this fine animation.



THE LORAX (2012)
This film had a message — it said, "People, please:
Stop your polluting, and save all the trees."
It starred Danny DeVito — so cheeky, so funny,
Taking some time out from *It's Always Sunny*.
For some, though, the climate-change aspect still jars,
You see, the Lorax popped up in an advert for... cars.

TOM ELLEN