

Great Directors: Kubrick

Dr. Strangelove 1964

Friday, November 7 - Thursday, November 13, 2008



Film Information

Directed by
Stanley Kubrick

Language
English

Running Time
93 minutes

Film Notes

In 2002, the magazine *Sight and Sound* gathered a collection of “Best Film” Top Ten lists, one pulled from a large pool of critics, another from a group of distinguished filmmakers. On the latter, DR. STRANGELOVE placed fifth, behind CITIZEN KANE, the first two GODFATHER films (which were coupled together), Fellini’s 8 ½, and LAWRENCE OF ARABIA. It was the only full-blown comedy to make the list (Jean Renoir’s THE RULES OF THE GAME notwithstanding), which is noteworthy only because it didn’t start out funny at all.

That is, when Stanley Kubrick set out to make DR. STRANGELOVE, he had a serious drama in mind. Consuming dozens of books on nuclear armament, the director had become an expert on the philosophies of such think-tankers as Herman Kahn and Henry Kissinger (both cited as possible inspirations for the title character), for whom the topic of nuclear war and mass casualties was not so much a doomsday scenario as the theoretical playground for scholarly thought. But then one particular theory stood out: Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), whereby two superpowers might subsist in peace through the continued threat of annihilating one other. The fundamental absurdity of that equilibrium was simply too much to ignore (see the reverse side for

Kubrick’s thoughts on the matter).

With a comedy now in mind, Kubrick brought in author Terry Southern to assist with the screenplay, though many of the laughs in DR. STRANGELOVE are the result of on-set improvisations by Peter Sellers. In fact, some of Sellers’ antics had to be scaled back. In the script, President Merkin Muffley suffered from a cold, but Sellers played up the illness to such effect that the crew kept cracking up. Kubrick then insisted that Sellers play the role straight, allowing other characters in the “War Room” scenes to stand out.

One of those, of course, is General Buck Turgidson, played by George C. Scott, whose hilariously over-the-top performance became a sore spot between him and Kubrick. The director reportedly urged Scott to let loose in early takes, assuring him they would never make the final cut.

—Casey



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“Mr. President, I’m not saying we wouldn’t get our hair mussed, but I do say no more than ten to twenty million killed, tops. Depending on the breaks.”

More Information

Screenplay by
Stanley Kubrick
Terry Southern

Based on the novel
‘Red Alert’ by
Peter George

Featuring
Peter Sellers
George C. Scott
Sterling Hayden
Keenan Wynn
Slim Pickens
Peter Bull
James Earl Jones
Tracy Reed

Cinematography by
Gilbert Taylor

Original Music by
Laurie Johnson

Film Editing by
Anthony Harvey

Country of Origin
UK

“My idea of doing it as a nightmare comedy came in the early weeks of working on the screenplay. I found that in trying to put meat on the bones and to imagine the scenes fully, one had to keep leaving out of it things which were either absurd or paradoxical, in order to keep it from being funny; and these things seemed to be close to the heart of the scenes in question.”

—Stanley Kubrick

Also Recommended

- The Great Dictator 1940 (Dir. Charles Chaplin)
- Lolita 1962 (Dir. Stanley Kubrick)
- Fail Safe 1964 (Dir. Sidney Lumet)
- Catch-22 1970 (Dir. Mike Nichols)
- MASH 1970 (Dir. Robert Altman)
- Being There 1975 (Dir. Hal Ashby)
- Brazil 1985 (Dir. Terry Gilliam)