

# DR. STRANGELOVE

## OR: HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE BOMB

"GENTLEMEN, YOU CAN'T FIGHT IN HERE. THIS IS THE WAR ROOM!"

### SYNOPSIS

This BAFTA Award-winning (Best Film) title is a black comedy about a group of war-eager military men who plan a nuclear apocalypse. Through a series of military and political accidents, two psychotic generals - U.S. Air Force Commander Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) and Joint Chief of Staff "Buck" Turgidson (George C. Scott) - trigger an ingenious, irrevocable scheme to attack Russia's strategic targets with nuclear bombs. The brains behind the scheme belong to Dr. Strangelove (Peter Sellers), a wheelchair-bound nuclear scientist who has bizarre ideas about man's future. The President is helpless to stop the bombers, as is Captain Mandrake (also played by Sellers), the only man who can stop them...

### PROGRAMME NOTES

While making *Lolita* (1962), Stanley Kubrick became obsessed with nuclear gamesmanship, disturbed by the apparent likelihood that war could erupt by accident. He was perhaps even more disturbed by the way people responded to the abstract concept of total annihilation. As he saw it, they "accepted it fatalistically"<sup>1</sup>. Kubrick read over 60 books on the topic and set out to make a film about it for his next project. When he visited London's Institute for Strategic Studies, its Director Alastair Buchan recommended a realistic and suspenseful nuclear war novel, *Red Alert* by Peter George. Kubrick was impressed by its technical authenticity and set out to adapt it into a serious drama with George as his co-writer.<sup>2</sup>

While developing the project, Kubrick kept crossing paths with the absurd and the comical. He came to realise that the story couldn't be absorbed through anything but a comic lens - it was so unprecedented in its horror that it was beyond any "ordinary scheme of aesthetics"<sup>4</sup>. So, he changed course to create a Kafka-esque satirical comedy instead. Bringing on a third writer, he turned to Terry Southern, whose edgy and irreverent humour he discovered when Peter Sellers gave him a copy of *The Magic Christian* as a gift<sup>5</sup>. The pair worked together to push the comical boundaries of the script. Kubrick would often ask Southern, "Now what's the most outrageous thing this guy would say at this point?"<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Schlosser, E. 2014. 'Almost Everything in "Dr. Strangelove" Was True'. [Online]. [16 April 2019]. Available from: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/almost-everything-in-dr-strangelove-was-true>

<sup>2</sup> Southern, T. 'Check-up with Dr Strangelove'. [Online]. [10 April 2019]. Available from: [https://filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/fall2004/line\\_items/strangelove.php](https://filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/fall2004/line_items/strangelove.php)

<sup>3</sup> As note 1

<sup>4</sup> As note 2

<sup>5</sup> Adrian, J. 1995. 'Obituary: Terry Southern'. [Online]. [11 April 2019]. Available from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituaryterry-southern-1581238.html>

<sup>6</sup> Southern, T. 'Terry Southern: Writing to His Own Beat'. Interviewed by Golden, M. Creative Screenwriting. Published online January 12, 2016.[Online]. [13 April 2019]. Available from: <https://creativescreenwriting.com/terry-southern-writing-to-his-own-beat/>

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

What neither Kubrick nor George knew was that even before they began drafting the first script, every member of the Pentagon's Scientific Advisory Committee for Ballistic Missiles had been sent an advisory copy of *Red Alert* by the US Department of Defense. Fifty years later, we know more about the remarkable resemblance of both book and film to reality, as protected government documents have since been released to the public. We now know, for instance, that President Eisenhower struggled with a dilemma in the '50s. Should he retain absolute Presidential control over the use of atomic weapons, safeguarding against foolish or accidental deployment? This would leave the US and NATO powerless if he were killed or otherwise indisposed. Or, should he relinquish some power to a handful of high-level members of the military, who could then deploy weapons without authorisation if the President could not be reached? He chose the latter, but this unprecedented situation found the weapons without sufficient safeguarding. Roughly 3,000 nuclear weapons were stored unlocked in various NATO locations around Europe.

Like many European directors of the time, he saw himself as more of a filmmaker, with at least one thumb in every production pie. While his perfectionism produced masterpieces, it is clear that collaborations are what made *Dr. Strangelove* so unique among Kubrick's pictures. Terry Southern energised the formerly straight script with comedic edits, while Peter Sellers brought his trademark character acting to three separate, wonderfully synchronised roles.

Following the success of *Lolita*, in which Sellers' character assumes several identities, Columbia Pictures agreed to finance *Dr. Strangelove* on the condition that this magic formula was repeated. Sellers was to play multiple roles – the eponymous Dr. Strangelove, an erratic German scientist with a Nazi-leaning past, the duty-driven British Group Captain Lionel Mandrake, and the meek US President Merkin Muffley.<sup>7</sup> Originally, he was also cast as Texan Major T. J. "King" Kong, a role he apologetically resisted due to difficulty with the accent<sup>8</sup>. In the end, he claimed an injured ankle at the time of filming. Despite the clear benefits of having Sellers on the bill, Kubrick was careful to avoid too much press promotion of Dr. Strangelove as 'a Peter Sellers film', in case it was too closely and exclusively associated with the comedy genre.<sup>9</sup>

Anything funny, including some eccentric physical comedy, had to also be emotionally plausible. A note at the start of the shooting script read, "the essentially truthful moods and attitudes will be portrayed accurately, with an occasional bizarre or super-realistic crescendo. The acting will never be so-called 'comedy' acting."<sup>10</sup> Kubrick was always looking for the surprise inherent in such a contrast, aiming to communicate the total absurdity of the possible.

He directed Sellers to drop a feigned cold as President Muffley. While it heightened the sense of his impotence, it amused the other actors too much. Similarly, the original closing scene – an all-out pie fight in the War Room – was cut because it simply was not malicious enough. It turned into slapstick, where Kubrick hoped the ultimate clown prop would ironically emphasise ruthless international hostility.<sup>11</sup>

Set design served to further augment this absurd reality. Dr. Strangelove's War Room, for example, was created to have an imposing, ultra-serious, and very believable appearance.

In the early '60s, Kennedy introduced international security codes for NATO, but the Air Force continued to resist them, taking insult to the suggestion and fearing it could play into the hands of disabling saboteurs. According to multiple claims, when a code was finally adopted on home soil in the '70s, it was shockingly simple: 00000000. While security measures has been continually improved, they will never be fool-proof.

In 1985, the USSR unveiled a system very much like *Dr. Strangelove's* Doomsday machine. "The Dead Hand", as it was named, would activate the launch of missiles to the US if it detected nuclear detonation within the USSR. Its existence was only revealed to the US following the end of the Cold War.<sup>4</sup>

Please consult additional work by Eric Schlosser for more reading on this subject.

Set Designer Ken Adam, a WWII veteran who later trained as an architect, was hired by Kubrick on the back of his work for the Bond film *Dr. No*. He would later win an Oscar<sup>®</sup> for Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*. The director instantly loved Adam's first sketch of the triangular War Room, which he saw as representative of a bomb shelter.<sup>12</sup> It also fit with his belief that a steep ceiling would be most resistant to nuclear shockwaves. As deeply involved in design development as the rest of production, Kubrick also requested that the 22-foot table be covered in green felt, to evoke the notion of nations gambling with Armageddon.<sup>13</sup>

In War Room scenes, actors' faces were lit solely by the circular lighting that hung above the negotiation table. This stark lighting left nowhere for their characters to hide. "We spent days...holding up photo floods to decide which is the best angle to light these actors with"<sup>14</sup>, said Ken Adam in an interview with the V&A Museum. Built at Shepperton Studios in London, the War Room set was among the largest indoor sets ever built.<sup>15</sup> Steven Spielberg described it as "the best set that's ever been designed"<sup>16</sup>. In fact, it was so fit for its purpose that Ronald Reagan believed it really existed inside the Pentagon.<sup>17</sup> It has influenced the design of sets and real-life negotiation rooms ever since, demonstrating Ken Adam's crucial role in making *Dr. Strangelove* so imposing, and so utterly – yet feasibly – strange.

COLUMBIA PICTURES PRESENTS PETER SELLERS GEORGE C. SCOTT

IN STANLEY KUBRICK'S "DR STRANGELOVE OR : HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE BOMB"

ALSO STARRING STERLING HAYDEN KEENAN WYNN SLIM PICKENS AND INTRODUCING TRACY REED AS "MISS FOREIGN AFFAIRS"

SCREENPLAY BY STANLEY KUBRICK & PETER GEORGE & TERRY SOUTHERN BASED ON THE BOOK "RED ALERT" BY PETER GEORGE

SONY

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY STANLEY KUBRICK

COLUMBIA PICTURES 

<sup>7</sup> Southern, T. (1994). 'Notes from the War Room'. Grand Street. Summer. [Online]. [13 April 2019]. Available from: <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4125-notes-from-the-war-room>

<sup>8</sup> As note 6

<sup>9</sup> Krämer, P. (2013). "To Prevent the Present Heat from Dissipating": Stanley Kubrick and the Marketing of *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). *The French Journal of Media and Media Representations in the English-Speaking World*. Issue 3: Cinema and Marketing. Page 6.

<sup>10</sup> As note 3

<sup>11</sup> As note 5

<sup>12</sup> Adam, K. Victoria and Albert Museum. (2008). Video: 'Ken Adam, designer – Cold War Modern'. [Online Video]. [1 April 2019]. Available from: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/k/ken-adams.-designer-cold-war-modern/>

<sup>13</sup> Lambie, R. 2016. 'Dr Strangelove: In praise of one of cinema's great film sets'. [Online]. [11 April 2019]. Available from: <https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/dr-strangelove/39279/dr-strangelove-in-praise-of-one-of-cinemas-great-film-sets>

<sup>14</sup> As note 12

<sup>15</sup> As note 2

<sup>16</sup> Dowd, V. 2013. 'Kubrick recalled by influential set designer Sir Ken Adam'. [Online]. [12 April 2019]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-23698181>

<sup>17</sup> Quito, A. 2016. 'The man who designed Dr Strangelove's apocalyptic set shaped today's negotiation rooms'. [Online]. [12 April 2019]. Available from: <https://qz.com/636778/the-man-who-designed-dr-strangeloves-apocalyptic-set-shaped-todays-negotiation-rooms/>