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DR STRANGELOVE or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

Guest critic BRYAN FORBES reviews the war we missed . . .

Directed and produced by Stanley Kubrick. Screenplay by Kubrick, Terry Southern and Peter George based on the novel *Red Alert* by Peter George. Director of photography, Gilbert Taylor. Editor, Anthony Harvey. Music, Laurie Johnson. Art director, Ken Adam. A Stanley Kubrick production, distributed by Columbia, through BLC. British. Cert. A. 94 mins.

Group Capt Mandrake/President Muffley/Dr Strangelove, PETER SELLERS; General 'Buck' Turgidson, GEORGE C SCOTT; General Jack D Ripper, STERLING HAYDEN; Colonel 'Bat' Guano, KEENAN WYNN; Major Kong, SLIM PICKENS; Ambassador de Sadesky, PETER BULL; Miss Scott, TRACY REED; Lt Lothar Zogg (Bombardier), JAMES EARL JONES; Staines, JACK CRELEY; Lt Dietrich, FRANK BERRY; Lt Kivel (navigator), GLENN BECK; Capt 'Ace' Owens, SHANE RIMMER; Lt Goldberg (radio operator), PAUL TAMARIN; General Faceman, GORDON TANNER; Admiral Randolph, ROBERT O'NEIL; Frank, ROY STEPHENS; and Members of Defence Team, LAURENCE HERDER; JOHN MCCARTHY and HAL GALILI.

The full time film critic must always keep a leery eye on the state of his currency; too many hastily pronounced masterpieces and he risks inflation. Fortunately, writing in isolation, I have no such worries and can throw my entire bankroll in Stanley Kubrick's direction—if the gesture cleans me out so much the better. I always play *en plein* at roulette: the even money chances are for the so-called experts.

So let's start with and then proceed from the statement that I consider *Dr Strangelove* to be a tragic-comic masterpiece—the first truly moral film of our time: courageous, outrageous, borrowing nothing, admitting of no compromise, very naked and very unashamed: a shattering, womb-trembler of a film.

Perhaps it is difficult, if not well nigh impossible, for the majority of non-Americans, unfamiliar with the holy writ of Americanism, to appreciate what Kubrick has dared to accomplish. It would be too easy to lucky-dip into the box of stock labels and pull out the one marked Sick Humour. It would be dishonest and an insult to Kubrick to suggest that here was merely an opportunist film-maker climbing on the CND bandwagon. It would be a tragedy if his serious joke was not taken seriously.

What has he accomplished then? What sets *Strangelove* (the very title is sword-edged) in a category apart? Very simply, it is this. He has taken The Bomb and used it as a banana skin, with a nuclear prat fall as the ultimate pay-off gag. Not funny? Well, then, try the plot for a

laugh. A United States General in absolute command of a nuclear strike force, goes mad, seals off his base and issues an order to his already airborne bombers to proceed past their failsafe points and drop their bombs on pre-determined targets within Soviet Russia. Are you hysterical? What does it remind you of—*Candid Camera*, *Compact*, or *Beat The Clock*? Well, remark the list of characters, all good comedy types—The President of the United States, the Russian Premier, the Russian Ambassador to the USA, the entire American War Cabinet, and Doctor Strangelove himself, a nuclear scientist. They don't suggest Laurel and Hardy to you? Your imagination doesn't extend that far? Or is it you just don't believe it?

Kubrick's genius (and there goes my critical life savings) is that he never attempts to suspend belief. At his most tragic he is at his most comic, displaying a degree of daring that takes one's breath away. Because of his skill (and possibly he is the most accomplished technician working in pure celluloid today) he is able to tread the razor's edge between laughter and horror from the first frame to the last, and his command of his medium is something to marvel at. He has always believed in the personal statement, and this is his most intensely *personal* film: not only is it signed with one signature, but also, watching it, you believe it is aimed at you alone.

Nothing in his past work has prepared us for *Strangelove* (although his *Paths of Glory*, a much under-estimated and grossly neglected film, ahead, alas, of its time, gave hints). So many critics deplore the fact that contemporary British and American directors refuse to be committed; well, they've got a bellyfull of commitment to digest here. He has photographed insanity in sane surroundings, he has shown the inmates running the asylum in cold, pure black and white with no trimmings, and he has done all this without once straying into the realms of fantasy. He realises that there is no fantasy today than can compete with our realities. In our world of double-think, where, with the aid of the right public relations man, the smoking of marijuana can be made socially acceptable on the grounds that it does not induce lung cancer, we deserve what we get. There is no need, in Kubrick's view, to exaggerate; nor is he

merely the bright cynic—he has too much taste for that; he just sets up his cameras and lets them record the very latest—and maybe the last—chapter in the human comedy.

His technique, although consistently dazzling, is never obvious, and the film is beautifully photographed (Gil Taylor) and beautifully edited (Tony Harvey). There is a combat sequence (GI Joe fighting GI Joe) which compares with the late Bob Capa's monumental coverage of the Spanish Civil War. The footage shot inside the nuclear bomber in flight has the ghastly urgency and reality of the television camera at the scene of a disaster. The dwarfing magnificence of the 'War Room' replica is never abused: once he has introduced it, Kubrick resists all obvious temptations and uses his wide-angle sparingly, shooting for the most part with a telephoto lens for his savage, searching close-ups. Throughout the film his cross-cutting is assured and the sequence of the actual fusing of the nuclear bombs is more exciting and more horrific than the collected works of Edgar Allan Poe. This is a great director's film and should be closely studied, not only by students of the human race, but by graduates of the cinema.

As in all his films Kubrick brings out the best in his actors. Sterling Hayden, George C Scott, Keenan Wynn and Slim Pickens all make magnificent contributions, but the major collective acting triumph belongs to Peter Sellers. He plays three rôles—the President of the USA, an RAF Group Captain and Dr Strangelove himself. One should not make the mistake of judging his achievement merely in terms of three different disguises (although let us give due credit to Stuart Freeborn, a make-up artist almost without parallel). When Sellers is on top form he defies comparison, and here he gives us a trio of characterisations, any one of which would be beyond his nearest rival. He plays one long scene (as the Group Captain) with Sterling Hayden with such controlled comedy genius that Danny Kaye's earlier efforts in the same disguise seem, in retrospect, like amateur night in Butlins. Likewise he avoids all the pitfalls inherent in the rôle of the President. But it is his staggering virtuoso performance as Strangelove in the closing sequence of the film that raises him a mushroom-cloud-high above his contemporaries.

I have no doubt that when *Dr Strangelove* is exhibited in the United States, the John Birch Society, Mr Barry Goldwater and other far flung outposts of liberal thought will attempt to burn the cinemas. This would be an encouraging sign that Kubrick's message has really gone home. Likewise I hope that the riot squads are out in Red Square if somehow they manage to smuggle a print into Russia. And if I was handling the distribution of this film I would have put up a screen in Trafalgar Square and shown it free on Christmas Eve, and then gone home and got down on my knees.