

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb

USA, 1964. PG. 93 min. Cast: Peter Bull, Sterling Hayden, Slim Pickens, George C. Scott, Peter Sellers; **Writers:** Peter George (novel), Stanley Kubrick; **Music:** Laurie Johnson; **Cinematographer:** Gilbert Taylor; **Producer:** Stanley Kubrick, Victor Lyndon; **Director:** Stanley Kubrick

Dr. Strangelove is Stanley Kubrick's humorous response to the apocalyptic fears of the 1950s. Often revered as the best black comedy ever made, Kubrick creates comic caricatures of high-level military and political figures, but he pulls it off without compromising serious depth.

Based on the novel *Red Alert* by Peter George, *Dr. Strangelove* takes place during the height of the Cold War, when tension was mounting between the United States and the Soviet Union. The maniacal general Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) believes the Russians are conducting a sneak-attack "shooting war", and furthermore that they are responsible for subversively contaminating "our precious bodily fluids". He orders a wing of bombers to move out of their fail-safe positions and pre-emptively attack Russia with nuclear weapons. Puffing away on his phallic cigar, General Ripper orchestrates a unique blend of madness by cutting off all communication and sealing off his army base.

One of the provisions of this "Wing Attack Plan R" instructs the crew on board "Leper Colony" to enable the CRM-114 discriminator which blocks all communication unless it is preceded by a three letter prefix code. Jack D. Ripper is the only one who knows this code (the code is encrypted in his mantra "Purity Of Essence"), but he locks himself and his executive officer, Col. Mandrake (Peter Sellers) inside his office at the Airforce base.

The film takes place in two other main locations: on board B-52 bomber "Leper Colony", where a group of loyal men prepare for WWII (look for James Earl Jones as a young pup), and in the war room, where President Merkin Muffley (Peter Sellers) is trying to solve the situation by coordinating with the Russians. The underground war room is a murky, cavernous locale with a round conference table and a large "threat board" display on the wall. The set design was inspired by the war room in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927).

Legendary character actor Peter Sellers displays incredible acting ability by playing three different roles: Dr. Strangelove, an ex-Nazi



German nuclear scientist with a temperamental robotic arm, Col. Mendrake, a jolly British military officer, and U.S. President Merkin Muffley, an under-educated, balding president with a plain accent. The title character did not appear in the novel; he was added by Kubrick and co-screenwriter Terry Southern. Sellers was nominated for an Academy Award for his performance.

Kubrick takes a stab at the Military in the scene where General 'Buck' Turgenson (George C. Scott) proposes complete annihilation of the Russians so as to prevent a nuclear overkill.

"Mr. President,' Turgenson says, "I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed, but I do say no more than ten to twenty million killed, tops, uh, depending on the breaks." Moments later President Muffley calls Russian Premier Kissef, who is drunk and blaring music in the background, and they engage in hot-line banter as the president tries to placate the Premier in a proverbial pissing contest to see who is more sorry about the possible nuclear war. Kissef informs the United States that the Russians have built a doomsday device, the ultimate weapon that would destroy all living animal and plant life, and that he will activate the device if the Russians got attacked. Dr. Strangelove makes his appearance to expound upon the workings of the doomsday device and tells us that the weapon has technology that takes over life, literally, and cannot be untriggered. Unfortunately, the doomsday device is not an effective deterrent when kept secret, as it was in this case.

Playboy model Tracy Reed (step-daughter to Sir Carol Reed, "The Third Man") shines in the male-dominated cast as Miss Scott, secretary/mistress to Gen. 'Buck' Turgidson. In Major "King" Kong's (Slim Pickens) copy of Playboy, the centerfold (who is in fact Reed) has a copy of the Council on Foreign Relations' house journal, *Foreign Affairs*, draped strategically across her rear. In addition to this joke, there are numerous sexual images and jokes throughout the film (mating airplanes, atomic bomb explosions), and many of the absurd names of the male military characters have sexual connotations that suggest a connection between war, technology, sexual obsession and the male sex drive. After all, Merkin might be the name of the president of the United States in this film, but it is also a pubic wig for women.

- Shannon Rutherford