

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

Terry Southern recalled a phone call from director Stanley Kubrick soliciting his help for an upcoming project that would eventually be called "Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb."

Southern wrote in Grand Street number 49 that he received a call from Kubrick on the morning of the first New England snow-fall in December 1962. His wife yelled to him that "big Stan Kubrick was on the line from Old Smoke." "Big Stan Kubrick" was a nickname Southern had given the director, and he thought his wife was joking with him.

He wrote that Kubrick "told me he was going to make a film about 'our failure to understand the dangers of nuclear war.' He said that he had thought of the story as a 'straight-forward melodrama' until this morning, when he 'woke up and realized that nuclear war was too outrageous, too fantastic to be treated in any conventional manner.' He said he could only see it now as 'some kind of hideous joke.' He told me that he had read a book of mine which contained, as he put it, 'certain indications' that I might be able to help him with the script."

The two would write one of the darkest and funniest movies of all time. When it first premiered on Jan. 30, 1964, New York Times film critic Bosley Crowther called it one of the "most shattering sick joke I've ever come across." "Dr. Strangelove," which will screen from Jan. 21 - 27 at the Brattle Theatre, tells the story of a general who suspects the communists are contaminating the bodily fluids of the American people; so he orders B-52 bombers to attack the former Soviet Union.

The performances of George C. Scott ("Gen. 'Buck' Turgidson"), Sterling Hayden ("Brig. Gen. Jack D. Ripper") and Slim Pickens ("Maj. T.J. 'King' Kong") remain as memorable as Peter Sellers triple-billed tour-de-force ("Group Capt. Lionel Mandrake"; "Pres. Merkin Muffley"; and "Dr. Strangelove"). Scott, himself, considered his role as Gen. Turgidson as one of his finest performances. Chicago Sun-Times film critic Roger Ebert agreed, explaining in his Great Movie column on July 11, 1999, Scott's "tics and twitches, the grimaces and eyebrow archings, the sardonic smiles and gum-chewing" go almost unnoticed because Scott sells his performance through his conviction and energy.



Ebert wrote, "'Dr. Strangelove's' humor is generated by a basic comic principle: People trying to be funny are never as funny as people trying to be serious and failing. The laughs have to be forced on unwilling characters by the logic of events."

Sellers was originally pressed by Columbia Pictures to play four roles in the film, including the role of Maj. T.J. "King" Kong. Southern recalled in his Grand Street article that at first, Sellers didn't think he could master the Texas accent; then, he was unable to do the part after an accident in front of an Indian restaurant in London. Kubrick originally tried to lure actor Dan Blocker of "Bonanza" for the part, Southern continued to explain, but Blocker's agent responded that the material was "too pinko" for the actor. The director eventually settled for Slim Pickens.

While the movie ends with bombs exploding to the song "We'll Meet Again," Kubrick originally planned to finish the movie with an all-out pie fight. In the war room, there is a table laid out with food that was supposed to be used for these scenes. In this 11-minute scene that was shot in one take, Terry Southern explains in Grand Street number 49, that the Soviet amabassador, upon hearing he is going to have a full body cavity search to find his hidden cameras, calls General Turgidson a "capitalistic swine" and lunges a custard pie at the general; it misses, instead hitting President Muffley. Turgidson then said "Gentlemen, the president has been struck down in the prime of his life and presidency."

Kubrick cut the scene because he thought it was too farcical, according to IMDB.com. It also shared too much similarity with the then-recent assassination of former President John F. Kennedy. Interestingly, the movie's release date was pushed back from December to January because of the Kennedy assassination.

Another Kennedy-related line was changed in the movie. When Kong reviews the Plan R attack kit, he said, "A fella could have a pretty good weekend in Vegas with all that stuff." The line originally referred to Dallas.

In his article about the making and release of the film, Southern also recounted a conversation with Kubrick that he had just before the film's release. Southern explained that the famed director had just finished getting off the phone with his contact at Columbia Pictures, Mo Rothman.

Kubrick said, "The publicity department is having a hard time getting a handle on how to promote a comedy about the destruction of the planet."

- Jason Nielsen