Peter Sellers plays three separate roles in Stanley Kubrick’s masterful Cold War comedy in which insanity and political manoeuvrings lead to nuclear meltdown.

Set mainly within legendary production designer Ken Adam’s imposing war-room, Dr. Strangelove charts an absurd but inexorable path towards nuclear oblivion that’s triggered when an unhinged American general believes the Russians have caused his impotence. Like most people during the 1960s, Stanley Kubrick feared the very real threat of nuclear war, yet produced a masterstroke in managing to make people laugh at a subject that was disturbingly close to reality when he adapted Peter George’s sci-fi novel Red Alert.

55 years after its release, Kubrick’s tour-de-force of political satire feels unnervingly prescient in the context of current global politics. A film about communication – or more accurately, the consequences of miscommunication, with its razor-sharp script it brilliantly critiques America’s fixation on military might, and lampoons the men who sit in the seats of power.

This interview by Oliver Lunn with Stanley Kubrick’s daughter Katharina originally appeared on BFI.org.uk in May 2019.

Katharina Kubrick was only nine years old when her father made Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1963), his bleakly hilarious film about the H-bomb and Cold War military strategies. She remembers visiting the set after school, she says, and playing in the garden at Shepperton Studios. Yet at the time, her father didn’t explain the looming threat of nuclear annihilation to her. He didn’t want to frighten her, after all. When she did finally see the film, as a teenager who understood the grave reality of the situation, it was deeply disturbing. “It isn’t until all the pennies start falling into place and you go, ‘Oh shit, that nearly happened.’”

On visiting the war room as a schoolgirl:

Though Katharina didn’t see the film until she was a teenager, she still has vivid memories of visiting the set as a nine-year-old. It was just part of her life, she explains, to visit the set at Shepperton Studios after school. “The one set I obviously remember spectacularly is the war room,” she adds, remembering its shiny floor and strong architectural form. “We had to wear felt overshoes, as everybody did, so that you didn’t scratch the floor. Shepperton was also a fantastic studio for a child, with a great garden and a little folly at the end where I would go and play.”

On the decision to have Peter Sellers play three roles:

“He was going to play four roles and then decided that that was actually too much,” says Katharina. Sellers was going to be Major Kong, too, but due to what was probably a mutual decision between Kubrick and Sellers, Katharina says they settled on three roles. “Peter was a great corpse, and there was an awful lot of hilarity,” she says. “So if you have somebody who is so multi-faceted and so incredibly talented and so willing to be utterly brave, why wouldn’t you take advantage of that skill? The great thing about Peter Sellers is that he did lose himself in the character, and you don’t think I’m watching Peter Sellers here.”

On the decision to make a comedy about nuclear annihilation:

“It’s sort of graveyard humour, isn’t it,” says Katharina of her father approaching the topic as a comedy. “It’s so awful, what can you do but laugh about it and hope it doesn’t happen?” Her father actually didn’t tell her about the dark reality that hung over them, she says, because he didn’t want to strike fear into the heart of a nine-year-old. “It’s not until all the pennies start falling into place and you go, ‘Oh shit, that nearly happened.’”

On the “enormously fun” custard pie fight sequence that was cut:

There was originally a custard pie fight sequence in Dr. Strangelove, and we have the images to prove it. Kubrick

Dig a little deeper, we spoke to Katharina Kubrick about her father’s film, her memories of visiting the set, and how it’s more relevant today than ever.
changed the scene – which took place in the war room – at
the last minute, cutting it out before the final print. “My mother
and I were there during the pie fight sequence, and we were
allowed to throw pies,” says Katharina. “For a child, that was
enormously good fun!” She even remembers what they were
made from: “They were actually foam pastry cases with shaving
cream.” In case you were wondering.

On Kubrick’s decision to shoot so many takes:

Katharina remembers a conversation she had with her father
about his reputation for shooting tons of takes. “I said, ‘Don’t
you get fed up with so many people saying you shoot so many
takes?’ and he said, ‘Look, I’ve got huge movie stars, I’ve got
huge film sets, I’ve got a crew, it’s all costing a fortune; the film
is the cheapest part of all of it. Why not have it running through
the camera? Because when actors are relaxed, when they think
they’re rehearsing, if you’ve got the camera running, you don’t
know what’s going to happen.’” It also gave her father more
options in the editing room. That was his favourite part of the
process, she says, likening it to a painter mixing up their colours
before approaching the canvas. “It’s as if all the takes Stanley
did were in the can, they were in his editing room, those were
all his colours mixed up and ready to go. So the editing room
was just him playing with the colours.”

On what makes the film such an effective critique of Cold War
military strategies:

“I think it demonstrates how ludicrous the situation is, number
one. And number two, how we innocent, ordinary human
beings going about our lives are completely in the hands of
whatever nutter has his hands on the trigger, and we are all
the victims of the politicians,” she says. For her, there’s a key
question at the core of the film: “What if there is a nutter,
what if he doesn’t care, what if he doesn’t think about the
ramifications of what he’s doing? That’s the real fear: that
there’s some lunatic – I can think of two of them right at this
moment – who has the potential to do that.”

On the terrifying timeliness of the film:

“Unfortunately, it’s more relevant now than ever,” says
Katharina. “I think that certain people should be forced to
wear lid locks and watch it all day every day until the truth
sinks home. Unfortunately, powerful and corrupt individuals
don’t get it, they don’t care, they don’t see the long view.” And
like any great piece of cinematic art, she says, people will be
discussing it forever. “As long as human beings are as awful as
we are, the subject and the fear are never going to go away.
The third world war won’t be a feet on the ground war, it will
be a mutual annihilation war, and that will be it.” A suicide
mission, then? “Which is why the ending of We’ll Meet Again
[a montage of mushroom clouds accompanied by Vera Lynn’s
wartime number] is the ultimate irony.”

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