



The War Room in *Dr Strangelove*;
Right: Peter Sellers as Dr Strangelove;
1964 poster for the film

Dr Strangelove at 60

As Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr Strangelove* marks its 60th anniversary with a London stage adaptation, Naomi Gryn explores the influences behind the bleakly comic masterpiece and its resonance today

As a rookie film-maker, I worked for a maverick underwater director. One hot summer's day, he asked me to take a can of 35mm footage of the atomic mushroom cloud at Hiroshima to Technicolor's Soho office. The technician on duty went nuts. "That's nitrate! You can't bring it here. It could ignite spontaneously on a day like today!" That's when I discovered something about the explosive power of film.

Sixty years after the release of *Dr Strangelove* or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, Stanley Kubrick's black comedy still ranks on IMDb as the 41st most influential film of all time. Now adapted for the stage by Armando Iannucci and Sean Foley, it opens at London's Noël Coward Theatre in October, starring Steve Coogan. On 26 September, BFI will screen the film, followed by a Q&A with the team behind the stage production.

Kubrick's satirical farce lays bare the insanity of indefinite stalemate as a defence strategy. This concept, rooted in game theory, reasons that the utter destructiveness of nuclear weapons and

probability of counterattack deters nuclear armed nations from initiating conflicts. It was dubbed in 1962 by a witty opponent of the policy as Mutual Assured Destruction (aka MAD).

Leon Minoff, interviewing Kubrick for *The New York Times* on the *Dr Strangelove* set in Shepperton Studios in 1963, asked him to explain the plot of his new film. "A psychotic general, who believes that fluoridation of water is a Communist conspiracy to sap and pollute our precious bodily fluids, has unleashed his wing of H-bombers against Russia. That's why the President has been summoned to the War Room. It develops that for various and entirely credible reasons, the planes cannot be recalled, and the President is forced to cooperate with the Soviet Premier in a bizarre attempt to save the world."

Several of the names of characters in the film are loaded with sexual innuendo; some are composites drawn from contemporary notables. The eponymous *Dr Strangelove*, we learn, changed his name from *Merkwürdigliebe* (German for - yes, you guessed it - "strange love")

when he became an American citizen. With his "Mein Führer" Freudian slips and compulsive Hitler salutes, *Strangelove* blatantly lampoons Wernher von Braun, the Nazi scientist who helped to design the V-2 rocket. Von Braun surrendered to the Americans and was brought to the USA, where he spent the next 15 years developing guided missiles for the US Army. Later, as director of NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, he worked on the Saturn V rocket that would, in 1969, propel the first astronauts to land on the moon.

Von Braun might have been a former Nazi, but he was no nuclear scientist: many of the stars of that show were Jewish. Albert Einstein's special theory of relativity and Leó Szilárd's nuclear chain reaction laid the foundations for the Manhattan Project which, under the leadership of Robert Oppenheimer, developed the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Oppenheimer's team of brilliant scientists included a disproportionate number of Jews. While one of them, Joseph Rotblat, resigned from Los Alamos when it became evident that

the Germans had abandoned their bomb project (and devoted the rest of his life to alerting the scientific community about the dangers of nuclear weapons) others, such as Edward Teller and John von Neumann became architects of an even deadlier device, the hydrogen bomb (or H-bomb), which was 1,000 times more explosive than its atomic cousin.

Also involved in the creation of the H-bomb was another Jewish physicist, Herman Kahn, a strategist and futurist at RAND Corporation, the prototype think-tank, its name a contraction of 'Research AND Development', ridiculed in *Dr Strangelove* as the "Bland Corporation". Kahn coined the term "megadeath," meaning one million deaths per nuclear explosion. The character of *Dr Strangelove* is, in part, based on him, as is US Air Force Chief of Staff General "Buck" Turgidson.

Kubrick's not-so-subtle clues include placing on the table in front of Turgidson a folder with "World Targets in Megadeaths" on its spine, while some of Turgidson's lines are borrowed directly from Kahn's 1960 book, *On Thermonuclear War*, as is the Domsday Machine, a hypothetical device that would trigger the destruction of the planet in the event of a nuclear attack and which is at the heart of *Dr Strangelove*'s plot. George C Scott plays Turgidson with gum-chewing cocky bravado: "Mr President," he briefs US President Merkin Muffley (Peter Sellers), "I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed. But I do say no more than 10 to 20 million killed, tops. Uh, depending on the breaks."

"Strangelove blatantly lampoons the Nazi scientist Wernher von Braun"



Like Kahn, Kubrick grew up in the Bronx, a crucible of Jewish culture at that time. In *Boys From The Bronx*, my own short film about two writers from the Bronx, Jerome Charyn recalls: "It's the place you had to escape from to keep your sanity ... the fact that we were able to redefine ourselves, to become the magical snake that can enter any universe comes in part from the fact that we ... had to find a kind of identity." Kubrick's family was assimilated and, as Nathan Abrams notes in *Kubrick: New York Jewish Intellectual*, he had no faith. "He received no formal Jewish instruction, never (as far as we

know) attended a synagogue or Hebrew School, and wasn't bar mitzvah; none of these things interested him."

Kubrick's first two wives were both Jewish, but Christiane Harlan, whom he married in 1958, was German and had been inducted into the Hitler Youth as a child. Christiane's uncle, Veit Harlan, made the notorious Nazi propaganda film, *Jud Suss*. This did not diminish Kubrick's fascination with the Holocaust and he spent many years developing *The Aryan Papers*, an adaptation of Louis Begley's novel *Wartime Lies*, set in Nazi-occupied Poland. Kubrick eventually abandoned the project on the basis that an accurate film about the Holocaust was beyond the scope of cinema.

Dr Strangelove remains as relevant as it was in 1964. With the divide deepening between democracies and autocracies, and clashing ideologies competing for allegiance, echoes of the Cold War reverberate around our fragile planet.

Today, eight nations are known to have nuclear weapons. Israel neither admits nor denies its nuclear capability, relying on this opaque stance as an insurance policy against its many adversaries, while

Iran is stockpiling uranium enriched to levels close to weapons grade. In recent months, both countries have been rattling their sabres of mass destruction, as have Russia and the USA. Ominously, since the beginning of 2023, *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists' Domsday Clock*, which warns the public about "how close we are to destroying our world with dangerous technologies of our own making" has been set at 90 seconds to midnight.

Accidental detonation is extremely unlikely, but there are many candidates for the role of crazed leader with their finger on the proverbial button. Back in Kubrick's War Room, the film edges towards its dark endgame with the realisation that a nuclear Armageddon is about to wipe out the earth. President Muffley scolds General Turgidson: "When you instituted the human reliability tests, you assured me that there was no possibility of such a thing ever occurring." Turgidson replies: "Well, I don't think it's quite fair to condemn a whole programme because of a single slip-up, Sir."

For me, *Dr Strangelove*'s radioactive reach stems from the fact that Sellers plays three different roles. Columbia Pictures had made it a condition of its financing the film that Sellers should play multiple roles because the company felt this had contributed to the success of Kubrick's 1962 film, *Lolita*, in which Sellers, as paedophile Clare Quilty, disguises himself as a policeman, a playwright and a German psychologist.

Sellers embodies three disparate characters in *Dr Strangelove*: US President Muffley, RAF Group Captain Lionel Mandrake and Dr Strangelove. His comic genius underscores how we all have the capacity to be evil – or, as God once put it, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life!" (Deut.30:19). ■

Dr. Strangelove runs at the Noël Coward Theatre, London, from 8 October until 25 January 2025. Drstrangelove.com. A screening of *Dr Strangelove*, accompanied by a Q&A, is at London's BFI later this year. Information will be posted later in the summer on Bfi.org.uk. Naomi Gryn is a writer and documentary film-maker.

