



# Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb



**James Earl Jones' Introduction  
to *Dr. Strangelove***  
*Inaugural event for Cold War Museum*



Jean Jacques Rousseau said that God is a comedian playing to an audience that is afraid to laugh. In his 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*, Stanley Kubric, a god in the pantheon of cinema, made us laugh out loud at thermonuclear war, an unfunny subject of mythic proportions.

As a member of the cast of *Dr. Strangelove*, and as a survivor of the Cold War, I am pleased to have the honor of introducing this film to you tonight and to share some of my experience in making it.

Stanley based his initial script for *Strangelove* on a novel by the British author Peter George entitled *Red Alert*, a tense thriller about the possibility of an accidental nuclear war.

Stanley came to NY to scout George C. Scott for the role of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. George happened to be playing in "The Merchant of Venice" at the Delacourt Theater in Central Park. So was I. Stanley loved George, and recruited him for *Dr. Strangelove*. He took me, too. It was my first role in films.

As the script evolved, Kubric decided to bring in the renown 'bad boy' Terry Southern to rework the film as a satire. Among many other changes wrought by Southern, an entirely new character was added to the story--the eponymous Dr. Strangelove, though he was initially called Von Klutz.

Southern and Kubric also gave all the characters funny names. Sterling Hayden's character became General Jack D. Ripper of Burpelson Air Force base. Slim Pickens' character became the B-52 pilot, Major T.J. 'King' Kong.

I had only a small screen presence in *Dr. Strangelove* as the B-52's bombardier, Lieutenant James "Jimmy" Zogg. The name came from Mandrake the Magician's sidekick, a black and bald-headed man who provided Mandrake with muscle power when prestidigitation failed. In the original script it was the bombardier's role, alone among the entire crew, to actively and provocatively doubt whether the command orders to nuke Russia were for real.

It was a very powerful role for a young actor to play in his first film. But as *Dr. Strangelove* evolved into a satire, the Zogg character's struggle to counterbalance military madness shrank to a single question, "Sir, do you think this might be some kind of loyalty test?" You can imagine how difficult it was for me to see all that good dialog land on the cutting room floor. There are those who say that Kubric did not want to give Zogg the distinction of keeping his head when all those around him seemed perfectly comfortable with blowing up the world.

I felt very fortunate to be working with Stanley Kubric, one of the most brilliant and innovative directors of our time. He was unique--the only man I have ever known who spoke with the manners of an English lord and chewed gum at the same time.

Stanley was unfailingly polite and even-tempered on the set. After every take that didn't work, even the one hundredth, he would say nothing more than, "Let's try that again."

Of course it was also true that Stanley was a control freak of the highest order and ran his set more like a dictator than a director. He treated actors as if they were technical elements in his design, not as creative professionals like himself.

I had decidedly uncomfortable moments as an actor under Stanley's direction. One day, hours before I was scheduled to be on the set, I was hustled into costume for an 'emergency shoot' for a scene full of Air Force techno-jargon.

Kubric wanted to shoot the scene right away. I simply told him, "I'm not ready for this."

He responded, "You mean you didn't learn your lines? Let's move to the next set."

I felt uncomfortable with him afterwards and I suspect it was mutual.

George C. Scott also had some difficult experiences with the director. George was head-strong by nature. It is what fueled his particular talent. Stanley was very much same kind of man. George had the additional habit, during his drinking days, of being rather pugnacious.

While I never saw him even close to drunk on the set, he looked convincingly hung-over on a regular basis, and appropriately irritable.

The irresistible force met the immovable object when Stanley asked George to do over-the-top performances of his General Buck Turgidson lines. He said it would help George to warm up for his satiric takes. George hated this idea. He said it was unprofessional and that it made him feel silly. After the sparks cleared, George agreed to do his scenes over-the-top if Stanley promised him that his performance would never be seen by anyone but the cast and crew. That was that. But Kubric ultimately used many of these warm-ups in the final cut, and George felt used and manipulated by Stanley.

As the only two Americans in the cast, George and I had many conversations, some quite heated, about the growing American presence in Vietnam. George, who later starred in *Patton*, said he had become a hawk the minute bomb shelters started being built. By the time I met him he had a very broad wing span indeed. I was not a dove, as I believed some wars, like World War Two, are justified and necessary. But I was not in favor of fighting this war.

"You're an American, aren't you?" George would goad me. "Doesn't that obligate you to support the war?"

"Yes, I'm an American. But I am struggling with the status of a second class citizen. So while I would not fight this war, I am bound to question its morality. "

The issue was complicated for me. I served in the military during the Korean war, although the truce was declared before I went overseas. I was a member of the first fully integrated officer corps in U.S. military history, a group created by President Harry Truman after WW2. There were men in my unit from the unreconstructed South who couldn't quite bring themselves to shake my hand.

My father, a protégé of Paul Robeson, had asked me not to fight in Korea. For him, as for Robeson, it was wrong for black people to fight yellow people for the benefit of white people. I told my father that I was no patriot but that I was a citizen, and that I planned to keep my uniform on to do my duty as a soldier. I wanted to defend my country.

At the time I was working on *Dr. Strangelove* my brother was eligible to serve in Vietnam. If he had wanted to go to Canada to avoid military service, I would certainly have supported that. Those were the days, of course, before Martin Luther King and others succeeded in persuading most Americans of the injustice of withholding equal rights from blacks and other people of color.

Amazingly, the Cold War ended without a nuclear war. Even more amazing, the former antagonists who once amassed enough nuclear weapons to kill every man, woman and child--and bug--on earth seven times over have become good friends.

That Russia has joined NATO, the very alliance created to contain Soviet imperialism, seems too strange an ending even for *Dr. Strangelove*.

Perhaps strangest of all, while almost no one today actively worries about a nuclear war with Russia, we should be. The latest US-Russian treaty, which will cut deployed strategic warheads to 2,200, leaves both nations still facing "assured destruction" and lets each nation keep total arsenals of more than 10,000 warheads each.

We are not safe from the dangers lampooned in *Dr. Strangelove*. Years from now, when this museum registers its millionth visitor, let us hope that the world will have changed enough so that people will find it hard to believe that the Cold War ever happened.

In the tribunal of the future they will ask many questions: Why did human beings threaten each other with such lethal weapons? Why were a cabal of generals and politicians allowed to manipulate people's fears? Why were military decisions made far from public oversight and debate?

I hope that the Museum of the Cold War will be a place for people to address these issues. I hope that all of us will do our part to advance this vital educational process. The future of our species, and our planet, may depend on it.

Human history may offer little evidence that we can learn to stop fighting wars, especially as powerful nuclear weapons become more portable and more available. But, as Stanley would say after every take that didn't work, even the one hundredth, "Let's try that again."

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