



One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)

Production: Fantasy Films

Certificate: X (1975) 15 (2016)

Run time: 134 minutes

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The second of three films to have won the “big five” Oscars: Best Film, Director, Actor, Actress and Screenplay, “One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest” was a long time in the making. Kirk Douglas’ production company acquired the rights to film and stage production of Ken Kesey’s book in 1962. Kirk Douglas appeared in the Broadway production as Randle McMurphy but couldn’t get the film made. None of the studios would green light it. He first tried to get Milos Forman to direct when he met him in Prague but the Soviet invasion after the “Prague Spring” kept Forman in Czechoslovakia under strict surveillance and prevented him receiving a copy of the book. m

In March 1975, Michael Douglas announced a new deal in which he would independently co-produce the film with Saul Zaentz, as the first project of Fantasy Records' new film division. Milos Forman (who had fled to the US) was asked to direct. He’d only recently received a copy of the book, describing it as "the best material I'd come across in America", and was unaware that this was the project Kirk Douglas had asked him to direct earlier. By this time Kirk Douglas was considered too old to play the lead. Zaentz financed the film personally, borrowing against his record company; it went over double the original budget of \$2 Million and took three months to make, on location in Oregon.

Michael Douglas had difficulty getting a distribution deal (like the book, banned in many US school districts, it was controversial). His last choice, United Artists eventually took it. The gamble paid off handsomely; the North American release alone grossed \$109 Million, UA’s highest at the time.

Of his stars, Forman wrote: (1)

“All the scenes stood or fell with Jack Nicholson, who was a dream to work with. He had none of the vanity, egomania, or obsessions of a star. He insisted on receiving the same treatment as everyone else. He was always prepared for his scenes and had a clear idea of what he wanted. His sense of humour put everyone at ease, which is always a great asset on a set. He helped the people around him because he knew that the better their performances were, the better he would look in the end.”

"Discovering Nurse Ratched in the prim, angelic Louise Fletcher (who was finally cast about a week before filming started) surprised me, but the more I thought about it, the more it made me sense. I'd learned long before that it's better to cast against type in the leading roles and with it in the minor roles. For reasons of economy and clarity, I prefer to give the audience a quick read of secondary characters by casting obvious physical types, but with the principal roles, it's more engaging to uncover a different personality under the obvious type, to peel away the erroneous expectations, to be surprised by a deeper knowledge of the character."

The film is an allegorical tragicomedy (although it ends on an upbeat note) of oppression and rebellion... and many other things.

Forman wrote in 2012 (2):

"To me, [the story] was not just literature, but real life, the life I lived in Czechoslovakia from my birth in 1932 until 1968. The Communist Party was my Nurse Ratched, telling me what I could and could not do; what I was or was not allowed to say; where I was and was not allowed to go; even who I was and was not."

Highly ranked in many lists of "Greats" or "Favourites" the film was deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" by the United States Library of Congress in 1993 and selected for preservation in its National Film Registry:

<https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/complete-national-film-registry-listing/>

- 1.) <https://milosforman.com/en/movies/one-flew-over-the-cuckoos-nest>
- 2.) Forman, Milos (July 10, 2012). "Opinion – Obama the Socialist? Not Even Close". The New York Times.