Colour Me Kubrick


Writer/director/editor: Brian Cook
Classification: M (Mature)
Duration: 86 minutes
We rate it: Four and a half stars.

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For both film aficionados and the public at large, Stanley Kubrick has long been a figure of fascination. Interest in Kubrick as an artistic figure has continued in leaps and bounds since the great director’s untimely death in 1999. As the visionary creator of many of the twentieth century’s landmark films, works like 2001: A Space Odyssey, A Clockwork Orange, Dr Strangelove, Full Metal Jacket and Eyes Wide Shut, Kubrick was a figure of intense acclaim and interest during his lifetime; a significant percentage of the world’s artistic community followed the filmmaker’s projects with obsessive interest. In his latter years, Kubrick’s refusal to travel outside England and his tendency toward reclusiveness increased his attraction for other parts of the popular press, as well as for gossip-mongers and mythographers. During the last decade of his life, however (and in large part because of the aura of mystery that had come to surround him) Kubrick attracted one of the most bizarre forms of attention possible: he was impersonated by a trickster, a con-man who passed himself off as the famous director in order to take advantage of the goodwill of individuals who were, it would seem, all too willing to believe they had encountered the great man in person.

The impostor, an Englishman named Alan Conway, was a deeply flawed, almost tragic figure, who it seems suffered delusions of many kinds during his lifetime. Quite apart from simply capitalizing on another man’s life and reputation, Conway seemed to believe in his own life’s status as a kind of art form; his was the kind of preposterous self-belief that denotes certain mental illnesses.

Kubrick, in the last few years of his life, came to hear that he was being impersonated by a con-man, and had an assistant keep detailed files on the activities and exploits of this strange impostor. The assistant, Anthony Frewin, decided that the case was far too fascinating to simply languish in a file, unread by the greater public. With Kubrick’s apparent blessing, Frewin began to turn the
story into a screenplay. More than ten years after the file was begun, and now six years after Kubrick’s death, we have a film dramatisation of this strange case: Colour Me Kubrick. Frewin’s screenplay has been filmed by another long-time Kubrick collaborator, Brian Cook (who worked with Kubrick for some thirty years as an assistant director). Cook, whose first feature film this is as director, has made a film that is as funny as it is fascinating, and he has managed to present Conway as simultaneously buffoonish, ingenious and tragic.

John Malkovich absolutely glows as Conway. Malkovich brings his trademark intensity to this very odd role, and highlights all of the wondrously complex elements that made up the conniving and deluded man. As Conway finagles his way into hotels, restaurants, and young men’s beds (yes, Conway was gay, though Kubrick himself was heterosexual, a contradiction few people seemed to notice during the con-man’s exploits) Malkovich somehow manages to suggest that while the game Conway was playing provided him with a strange kind of excitement and release, it also represented a kind of emotional time bomb that was set to explode once enough people had been duped by the impostor.

Cook has collaborated with a wonderful group of people both in front of and behind the camera, and the result is a film that tells a story that will fascinate anyone, not just fans of Kubrick’s work. While Colour Me Kubrick certainly is filled with all sorts of clever allusions to Kubrick’s own films (snatches of music, tracking shots, particular costumes and moments of dialogue all point to an insider’s knowledge of the great director’s output) the story the film tells will be as compelling for Kubrick novices as it will for die-hard devotees. A very funny study of a very sad and deluded man, Colour Me Kubrick is, for my money, one of the smartest films of the year.

Nick Prescott.