

One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest (film)

By Jim Schepke

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, a film based on the 1962 book by Oregon writer Ken Kesey, is regarded as one of the greatest films of all time. Made in Salem and Depoe Bay in the winter of 1975, the movie tells the story of Randle Patrick McMurphy, who feigns insanity in order to be recommitted from a prison farm to a state mental hospital. At the hospital, he becomes the rebellious leader of patients in his ward but also the nemesis of Nurse Ratched, who is determined to maintain control of her ward at all costs.

Kirk Douglas purchased the stage and screen rights to *Cuckoo's Nest* for \$47,000. In 1963, he played McMurphy in a Broadway adaptation of the novel, but the show proved to be unpopular with audiences and closed after three months. Douglas spent years attempting to interest Hollywood in a film version, and in the early 1970s he signed the rights over to his son, actor Michael Douglas, who asked his father to "let me run with this." Saul Zaentz, a wealthy Berkeley record producer and a fan of Kesey's novel, put up \$2 million to become the co-producer of the film with Douglas.

The next step was to find a location for the film. Kesey's novel was set at the Oregon State Hospital in Salem, though the institution was not named in the book, and the hospital's superintendent, Dean R. Brooks, was enthusiastic about the project. By the mid-1970s, the hospital had only about six hundred patients, a significant decline from the more than three thousand it had in the late 1950s. Two wards, Wards 3 and 4, were empty and could be used for the filming. On June 7, 1973, the producers, Brooks, and Governor Tom McCall met and decided to make the film at the hospital. "Filming *Cuckoo's Nest* will bring a lot of tension to Oregon State Hospital," Brooks told the *Capitol Journal*, "but it won't be detrimental." Filming began about two years later.

The choice of a director for the film was Milos Forman, a young Czech director who was willing to work on the low-budget production. The lead role of McMurphy was first offered to established Hollywood stars such as Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman, but Jack Nicholson, fresh from celebrated performances in *Easy Rider* and *Chinatown*, was signed for the part. The important role of Chief Bromden, a patient in the hospital and McMurphy's closest friend, was cast with an unknown, Will Sampson, a six-foot-seven-inch-tall member of the Muscogee Tribe. The part of Nurse Ratched went to a little-known, low-cost actress, Louise Fletcher.

Ken Kesey wrote a screenplay for *Cuckoo's Nest*, but the producers rejected it. His screenplay was much like the book, told from Chief Bromden's point of view and with a high degree of surrealism, but Douglas and Zaentz wanted a more straightforward story with McMurphy as the focus. They turned to veteran screenwriter Larry Hauben and a newcomer, Bo Goldman.

Filming got underway in January 1975. It was a particularly dark and rainy winter in Salem, which contributed to the somber mood of the film. The set was closed, and a large green fence went up on Center Street to block off Wards 3 and 4. The actors were given permission to shadow patients at the hospital and to learn how the institution operated.

Dr. Brooks was cast as the hospital administrator, Dr. Spivey, and five other psychiatrists had minor roles. Eighty-nine patients at the hospital were hired as paid production assistants or were cast as movie extras. Governor McCall had a brief cameo as an announcer who appeared on a television in the ward. The eleven-week shooting schedule was grueling, often with twelve-hour days, six days a week. The final week of filming took place in March in Depoe Bay, where McMurphy, having hijacked a bus, takes his fellow patients on a fishing trip.

Cuckoo's Nest premiered in New York City and Los Angeles on November 19, 1975. The Oregon premier was a benefit for the Mental Health Association in Portland on December 18th and opened to the public on Christmas Day. Though the first reviews of the film were mixed, it was an immediate hit with audiences. In March 1976, *Cuckoo's Nest* received five Academy Awards—for best screenplay, best director, best actor, best actress, and best picture—the first time in forty-one years that a film had taken all the top awards.

Though Ken Kesey claimed he never watched the movie, he did benefit from an out-of-court settlement that eventually earned him over a million dollars in royalties. Still, he never got over the

rejection of his screenplay. "Oscar night should have been one of the great days of my life, like my wedding," he said. "When they can be turned around to break your heart like this, well, it's something you never thought would happen."

Although the film went over the original \$2 million budget and ended up costing more than twice that, it is one of the most financially successful movies of all time, grossing more than \$108 million in the United States and Canada.

Sources

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