

# EYES OPEN INTER



***It was an opportunity many actors would kill for – a part in *Eyes Wide Shut*, the last film by Stanley Kubrick. It was a chance to witness the master at work with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. But Jackie Sawiris ran into problems the moment she first met the director ...***

**I** COULD hardly contain my indifference when I was offered a part in *Eyes Wide Shut*. It was Stanley Kubrick's first film in ten years – and perhaps his last, as the media and industry big dogs were predicting, with uncanny accuracy.

When the offer came through to play Roz, Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman's babysitter in the film, I already had one of the lead roles in a low-budget independent feature called *The Big Swap*. What did I care that some bigger-budget production had offered me a small part – I was happy being a big fish in a small pond. In fact, I forgot about the Hollywood machine grinding away in my own backyard until *The Big Swap* was finished. Instead of being sucked into the vacuum that hovers up the remains of most actors at the end of a job, I was thrown straight into another gig. It was a bit of a slow burner though. After four months and several false starts, the phone call I'd been waiting for finally came. So it was with one part trepidation and two parts excitement that I stepped into the glory of my former hometown, New York City, recreated on the lot of Pinewood Studios.

"Hi, I'm Brian. First assistant director."  
 "Hi, I'm Larry. I'm the lighting cameraman."

"Hi, my name's..."  
 I was so amazed by the friendliness of the crew when I finally went down to meet my maker that after those first few friendly introductions I gleefully threw myself into the eye of the storm that is every film set. In my desire to match smile for smile, handshake for handshake, I embarked on a verbal rampage, propelling my hand towards the few crew members who had yet to be sprayed by my spitte.

"Hi! I'm Jackie! I'm playing Roz the babysitter!" I whinnied in my best Barbie-on-speed impersonation.

"Hello," said a little old man wearing a wry grin that was struggling to develop into a smile. "Hi Stanley Kubrick."

His eyes twinkled. He looked more like Jerry Garcia, late singer of the Grateful Dead, than the director from Hell he was purported to be. Kubrick allowed me to continue treating his hand as though it were a pump-action shotgun in need of reloading. With one last squeeze he ambled away, his invitation to follow enveloping the humble mass of embarrassment I had become. Little did I know that I had endeared myself to the director of this star-studded feature by not recognising him. I could only kick myself for not realising that this was a man I held in the highest regard. He was, after all, the director who had most successfully transformed Stephen King's fiction to the screen, in *The Shining*.

Thankfully my heart remained firmly wedged in my mouth, preventing me from humiliating myself further. Although to this day I often wonder – would he really have been offended if I had told him he reminded me of a dead man?



We prowled the set, where it seemed no expense had been spared to recreate the kind of lush apartment most New Yorkers only dream about. Somewhere between the hallway and bathroom I lost him; it was something I'd quickly get used to. For Kubrick had this ethereal way of materialising out of nowhere, then disappearing – without a sound, as if he were a wisp of smoke from some unseen blaze. Paintings adorned the walls of every room, bathing the scene in vibrant beauty. In the middle of eyeing up a particularly large and fascinating one, I heard a shuffling behind me that I took to be rats (I figured they were going for hardcore New York reality) and chose to ignore it. The ominous sounds continued until I cautiously turned around to find my director. "I want that," I told him, pointing at the painting. "It's beautiful."

He studied it, tilting his head this way and that. "Yes," he said. "It's my wife's. They're all my wife's."

On set, Kubrick hugged the shadows, eyeing up the scene as if it were filled with opponents just waiting for a weakening in his strategy. Shaking his head, he muttered to himself. "What's that doing there?" And then, in all his legendary meticulous glory, he darted over to a coffee table, aiming for the corner of a tiny red notepad that had been placed beneath a stack of dog-eared magazines. He pulled the pad out by its exposed end and laid it carefully, almost reverently, on top of the magazines. He continued playing chess with the props, shifting them around until the affluent Manhattan apartment arrived at some kind of disordered perfection. Ambling back to the sidelines, he called out to clear the set of any extraneous bodies. Then the tedious rehearsal process (a mere taste of what was to come) continued.

By the time Tom Cruise introduced himself – "Hi, I'm Tom, nice to meet you!" – framed by a smile bigger and brighter and far more lovely than its onscreen counterpart, I had learned my lesson. I gave his hand an economical shake before turning back to indulge in a little crayon therapy with Madison, the young actress imported from California to play Cruise and Kidman's daughter in the film.

Sinking back into a sofa as soft as a marshmallow, I could see a still on the monitor from a scene shot earlier on. Frozen in stark monochrome was a silhouetted Cruise, dwarfed by the huge window in front of which he was standing. His black-suited back faced the camera, melting into the hazy wash of bright white light pouring from the window. I was transfixed. This must be what all those Kubrick fans were on about. The rest of the story was unnecessary; that image was worth 10,000 words. Complex simplicity at its finest.

"Cookie?" Kubrick enquired of the back of my head, plonking his hands on my shoulders as he emerged from behind the couch. Cast and crew moved in a great wave towards the refreshments awaiting us in the massive off-set area that echoed with our footsteps. I was used to money-saving, low-budget shooting schedules that moved like cheetahs instead of the lumbering elephant that was *Eyes Wide Shut*. To have spent an entire day rehearsing one scene was both a blessing and a curse. The multitude of goodies was far too overwhelming for my shell-shocked mind and I had just resigned myself to going without when Kubrick appeared by my side. "Oh here, try these, they're the best," he recommended, showing a particularly large, chocolate biscuit in my mouth. "Good, huh?" he asked, following his grandfatherly grin over to the hot drinks.

In the great beyond, Nicole Kidman sat at an oversize picnic table explaining in perfunctory fashion how she came to possess her American accent and movie star husband. It had been said that she was shy, and her porcelain beauty only accentuated this in fantastic regal style. I had begun to wonder where Kubrick had disappeared to when he strolled from the set, with Cruise in tow. "Hey Jackie," Kubrick called over conspiratorially. "Tom thinks you do a great American accent."

I yelled back: "Gee thanks Tom – that's because I am!" Tossing back the ballpup napkin that had accompanied my explanation, Cruise grinned even more under Kubrick's friendly clasp on the back. How very human we all were.

*Opportunity knocks; just once  
 And comes again no more.  
 Temptation bangs and pounds  
 Till it smashes in your door.*

The childhood rhyme rang monotonously round my brain the following day when I found myself alone in the make-up room with that most coveted of all *Eyes Wide Shut* items – the script. I felt like a secret agent with a secret file just within reach. My fingers twitched to clasp the whole thing instead of the pages of my-lines-only that had been faxed to me just days before I began shooting.

On-set secrecy was no secret; the media had made much of Kubrick's insistence that the production be kept behind closed



**Riding high: Tom Cruise and son Conner with Stanley Kubrick - one of the last pictures taken of him before his death**

doors. A vigilant production assistant spied my momentary deliberation and – not unkindly – lifted the script from its perch on the counter. The door slammed shut. It was time to shoot.

And shoot we did. Take after take after take, each one punctuated by a study of the monitor to see if it made the Kubrick grade. Each one looked the same to me and eventually I left the master to his method, content to watch him and Cruise and Kidman go over each take with a fine-toothed comb. As the morning reeled into the afternoon, the temper for which Kubrick is infamous made an appearance in the wake of ill-remembered lines and ill-executed camera moves. Kubrick's perfectionism was the method to his madness. He impregnated the atmosphere with care and urgency, ushering the scene into celluloid birth. Maybe it was the native New Yorker in him that insisted – of himself and those he worked with – on 100 per cent performance; 100 per cent achievement.

Whatever the reasons, I steered clear of him when the cameras ceased their rolling with a final gummy "Cut!". However, as cast and crew rumbled towards lunch that day, Kubrick accosted me beside the cookies to which he had introduced me. My opening remark, regarding how nice it was to hear a biscuit referred to as an all-American cookie, initiated a dialogue that took us from England to America and all the way back again. It was during that journey that his impassioned pragmatism cut through my jaded pessimism towards acting and kept me this side of the Atlantic.

Kubrick considered that my idea of returning to the US might prove to be a strategic one, as there was so much work there. Also, he affirmed, the more enthusiastic can-do, will-do attitude of my home country was far more conducive to making a success out of a career that requires huge amounts of tenacity. But then, chin in hand, stroking the greying tendrils of his beard, he gently reprimanded me. "There's a great lack of competent American actors over here," he told me. "You're more than competent. I thought your audition tape was really good. That's why you're here."

I gushed my thanks but he shook his head and continued, elaborating on the work that would be available as more and more Amer-

ican movies – *Star Wars* for example – started shooting in the UK.

I complained that by the time the productions made it to English shores, the only parts available would be smaller than a

seashell, but he insisted on perseverance. "Let's face it," he said, "Roz is a small part but it's something. A stepping stone. Right?" The man was a reservoir of infectious optimism.

Looking around, I spied Cruise and Kidman, heads bowed in an open display of affection that I had seen before, both on and off-set. They treated each other with the respect and kindness inherent in true friendship. To develop and maintain that kind of relationship while weathering the storms of Hollywood was, Kubrick and I silently agreed in raised eyebrows, impressive and worthy of emulation.

The maelstrom of publicity created by the impending release of *Eyes Wide Shut* – with all its talk of lurid sex scenes between Cruise and Kidman – has thrown books and articles my way. But far more exciting is the mythic aura instigated by the secrecy surrounding the shoot and maintained in the run-up to the film's American release next month.

Being kept in the dark about the plot forced me to develop total trust in Kubrick. And witnessing the alchemy he employed in realising his celluloid vision – a process peppered with humour, wisdom, impatience and generosity – was more than enough to inspire an unconditional faith in him.

I'm glad I didn't know much about Kubrick before we worked together. I had received a gift – a lighthearted peek, unburdened by historical hearsay, at a cinematic heavyweight. That peek was made most poignant by his death. Hearing the news while far from home, I wept bittersweet tears. I frantically e-mailed my friends, desperate to find out if Kubrick had managed to finish editing the film – and of course, how he had died. My heart played host to a tug-of-war between elation and misery.

Rumour became reality. *Eyes Wide Shut* is Kubrick's last film. One realisation washed over me: I was irrevocably part of it. And now that Kubrick is gone, I'm even more grateful for those brief but sublime glimpses into his enigmatic world. □