

Kubrick's lost movie

The legendary director dreamed of making a Holocaust film. But Spielberg beat him to it. Now, a new exhibition will show us what we missed. By **Geoffrey Macnab**

You probably haven't heard of Johanna ter Steege, even if the legendary American filmmaker Stanley Kubrick once called her the best actress he knew. Ter Steege, who was born in 1961, has had a reasonably successful career, appearing in such films as George Sluizer's *The Vanishing* (1988), Istvan Szabo's *Sweet Emma, Dear Boebe* (1992), and Bruce Beresford's *Paradise Road* (1997) but she is hardly a household name, even in her native Holland.

It could all have been so very, very different. The actress chuckles as she remembers the circumstances in the early 1990s when she was summoned over to St Albans to meet Kubrick. He wanted her to play the lead in his "Holocaust" film, *The Aryan Papers*, which he was planning to adapt from Louis Begley's semi-autobiographical novel, *Wartime Lies*. If the film had been made, she would have become a huge international star.

"He [Kubrick] was convinced that he had found an actress whose performance would catapult a new star to the forefront of international stardom and give this dark and serious film the needed 'gloss'," Kubrick's brother-in-law and producer Jan Harlan has said of Ter Steege. He believes that it was "devastating" for her that the film wasn't made. "It's like a young musician getting his first Carnegie Hall [concert] and then being told you can't do it. It must be terrible, after you've prepared yourself for months and months."

The movie may have been abandoned but audiences will at least have the chance to experience the "ghost" of *The Aryan Papers* through a new installation by the Turner Prize-nominated artists Jane and Louise Wilson, which will be shown as part of next month's Stanley Kubrick season at BFI Southbank. The Wilson sisters have scoured the Kubrick archives for stills and information about the movie, poring over wardrobe research stills and period stills.

As Jan Harlan reveals, Kubrick had been trying to make a Holocaust-themed drama for more than 20 years. It was a daunting challenge – how do you condense one of the most horrific episodes of the 20th century into a two-hour dramatic feature? Kubrick had no desire to make a documentary. At one stage, he had considered making a film set in the German film industry of the Nazi era, as propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels was pulling the strings. However, he couldn't find a story or script that satisfied him.

When Harlan approached the novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer on Kubrick's behalf to ask him to write an original, Holocaust-themed screenplay in the 1980s, Singer responded: "I don't know the first thing about it." What Singer inferred was that an outsider couldn't begin to do justice to the Holocaust. This was certainly a subject too challenging for a film-maker – even one as brilliant as Kubrick – to have any chance of interpreting in a meaningful way in a dramatic movie. Chastened by Singer's remark, Kubrick continued to do a huge amount of research. Eventual-



In Ter Steege, Kubrick had found a muse for what would have been his most daring and contentious feature

ly, in Begley's novel (published in 1991), he found a book that was both intimate and authoritative.

"It's a big, risky topic," Harlan says today of Kubrick's screenplay for *The Aryan Papers*. "It is not a drama that is over-the-top and has lots of action. It is a very silent film, a very serious film. The tension is in this horrendous, low valley of humanity that existed because of the Nazis."

The role of Aunt Tania in *Wartime Lies* would have been extremely demanding. Ter Steege was to play a beautiful and acerbic Polish-Jewish woman who helps her young nephew Maciek escape the Nazis by pretending to be Catholic.

"He [Kubrick] phoned me. We talked for 30 minutes on the phone. He asked me several questions about the films I had done – very specific questions," the actress recalls of her first talk with the film-maker. He had seen her films several times and was in deadly earnest about casting her. Ter Steege was summoned over to England to meet Kubrick for a screen test.

Bizarrely, during their first meeting, Kubrick asked her questions about sport and about Richard Krajicek, the Dutch tennis player. He was cordial and polite: very different from his reputation as a Prospero-like hermit. "He was very, very interested in who you were. He was in-