

Produced and directed by Norman Jewison. Screenplay by William Rose. Based on the novel *The Offshore Islanders* by Peter Benchley. Cinematography by Joseph F. Biroc. Art Direction by Robert F. Boyle. Original Music by Johnny Mandel with assorted classical pieces and Russian folk tunes. Edited by Hal Ashby and J. Terry Williams. Key Costumer: Wesley Jeffries.

Cinematic length: 126 minutes. Distributed by United Artists outside America. Companies: The Mirisch Corporation. Cinematic release: May 1966. VHS release: 1981. DVD release assorted dates. Check for ratings. Rating 90%. All images are taken from *Wikipedia* and *Wikimedia* and the public domain with permission.

Cast

Carl Reiner as Walt Whittaker

Eva Marie Saint as Elspeth
Whittaker

Alan Arkin as Lietenant Rozanov

Brian Keith as Police Chief
Mattocks

Theodore Bikel as The Russian
Captain

John Phillip Law as Alexei Kolchin

Andrea Dromm as Alison Palmer

Jonathan Winters as Officer Norman
Jonas

Paul Ford as Fendall Hawkins

Tessie O'Shea as Alice the telephone
operator

Michael J. Pollard as the
airplane mechanic

Don Keefer as Irving
Christiansen

Sheldon Collins as Pete
Whittaker

Guy Raymond as Lester Tilly

Cliff Norton as Charlie Hinkson

Richard Schaal as Oscar

Milos Milos as Lysenko

Cindy Putnam as Annie
Whittaker

Ben Blue as Luther the horse
riding messenger

Review



Initially no topic could seem more disastrous for a comic treatment than a confrontation between American forces and a Russian submarine, a confrontation that may perhaps lead to a world war. This was particularly so in 1966, during the cold war and after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis involving Russian submarines. Hollywood had previously made films about submarines and cold war confrontations that should have precluded any type of comic treatment. *On the Beach* (1959) dealt with the end of the world after a nuclear war. *The Bedford Incident* (1965) depicted what should have been a minor confrontation ending in a nuclear wipeout. So how did everyone concerned with making the film produce a comical, critical and very popular commercial success out of such material?

First it rapidly becomes apparent that nobody will die or suffer serious harm. Second the plot unfolds as a comedy of errors. Nearly everybody appears as inept

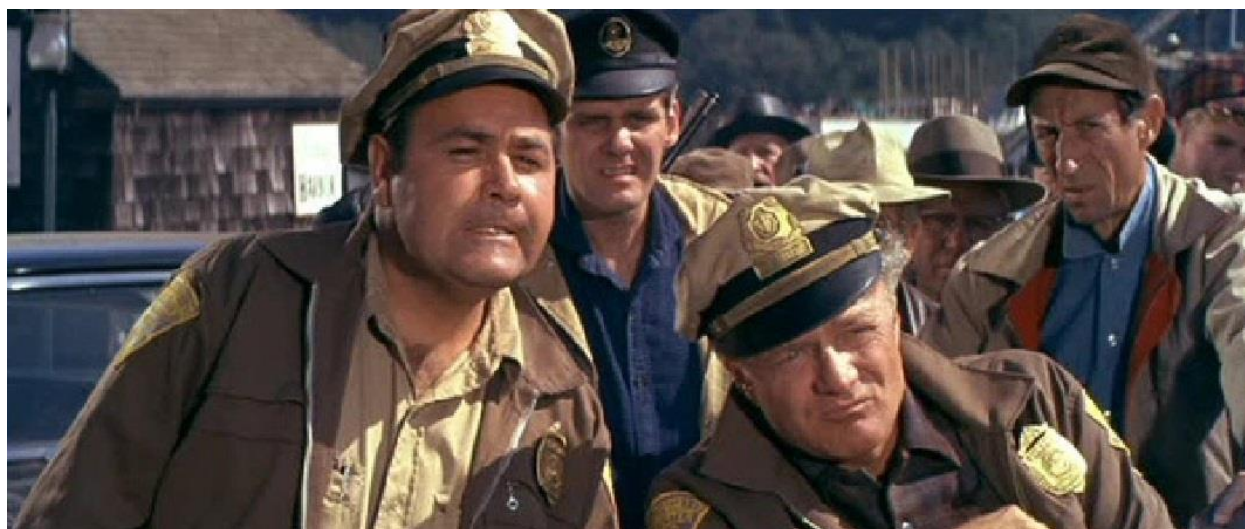
or misunderstands in harmless, ironic or absurd ways. By serendipity and ultimately the common bond of being human these misunderstandings ultimately do not matter. We see a great deal of frenetic, deluded activity that gets nowhere but gives laughter and smiles. The juxtaposition between the fearful beliefs of people in that state and the more gentle reality leaves us smiling. While American home guards fearfully discuss where the Russians are and where they will attack next with their murderous massive forces, we see where one Russian sailor Alexei Kolchin (John Phillip Law) is - on the peaceful beach building sandcastles with a toddler, while trying to romance Alison Palmer (Andrea Dromm) the babysitter.



Several of the major players in the situation find themselves together. From left to right Lietenant Rozanov (Alan Arkin), Alexei Kolchin (John Phillip Law), Elspeth Whittaker (Eva Marie Saint), Alison Palmer (Andrea Dromm), Walt Whittaker (Carl Reiner).

Second, the setting of fictional Gloucester Island, off the coast of Massachusetts, on a lazy, just off tourist season early autumn Sunday exerts a sense of idyllic charm. A third reason is that by 1966 the world was very weary of the McCarthyist mentality and ready, even desperate to laugh at it. It was a worldview which provided much to ridicule. From 1947 until the middle of the 1950s Hollywood in particular had suffered much under the anti-communist witch hunt and wanted to give some payback, however gently they went about it here.

A fourth reason for success are the adept comic performances from a near perfect cast. The best settings and ideas cannot make a good movie by themselves.

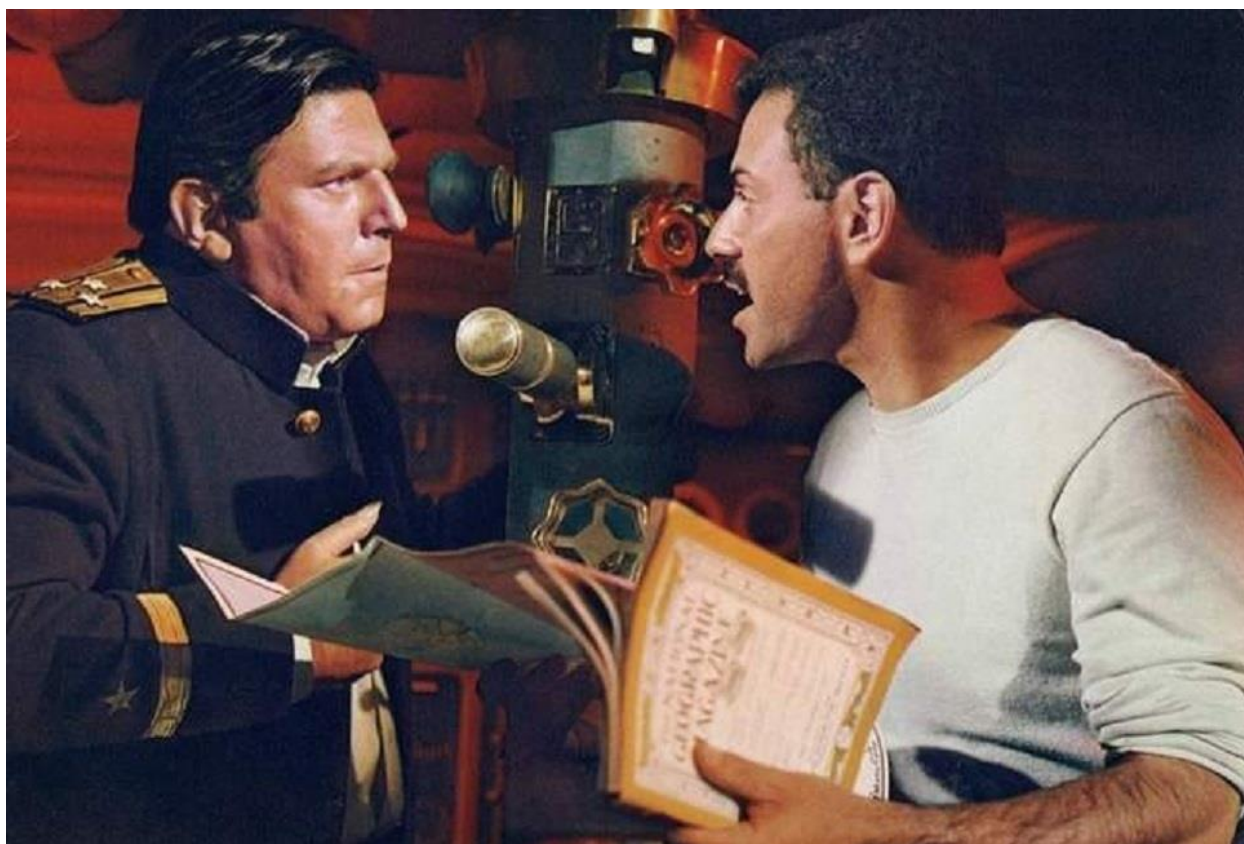


The law on Cloucestor Island

Jonathan Winters as the bumbling, high energy, slightly dim deputy and Brian Keith as his wry, patient sheriff who only wants to get a Sunday morning sleep in are perfect foils. So are husband and wife team Carl Reiner and Eve Marie Saint. She is phlegmatic, which makes for a welcome contrast amongst so many choleric, vexed high energy and paranoid characters. He is grumpy, unable to relax, suffering writer's block. Another pairing of opposites is the former folk singing friends Theo Bikel and Alan Arkin; they are standouts as the Russian officers. Bikel is the burley bone headed submarine captain who causes the initial problem by sailing too close to the coast because he wants to see America. He ignores his political officer Ryzanov (played by Alan Arkin) who tells him the maps the captain has faith in are outdated. Considering that their maps are in very old *National Geographic* magazines he has a point. This map's origins are visualised, not verbalised and both the humour and the subtlety of the point could be lost. The supposedly mighty, extremely dangerous Russian war machine relies on the same maps that American schoolchildren use.

Oddly after the cold war Russian revelations showed that this movie was on the right track. The Russian war machine was overrated. Submarines often malfunctioned or ran aground. Some military and naval sections were ramshackle, cobbled together or much given to human error. Ceremonial parades were sometimes like something out of this movie, when a few missiles were secretly rotated past the rostrum cameras to give an impression of vast numbers. Throughout the film the bumbling Russians are shown as fallible humans, although

at the climax the blustering captain also reveals that he can be truly dangerous as well as humane.



The Russians argue, crash and land

When the submarine is stranded the captain orders Ryzanov to take a detachment of eight and find a motor boat that will be able to tow them off the rocks. Ryzanov, who seems to live in a state of vexation that frays at his nerves, arrives with his detachment at the Whitaker's holiday beach house. The 1950s American nightmare of a Russian invasion overtaking their homes gets a depiction that does not appear to be funny at first, but becomes so as everybody bumbles and everybody misunderstands. The attempts of the Russians to communicate in English are truly comic, and the joke is on the language as much as the Russians as they are caught up in the intricacies and illogicalities of one of the world's most impossible languages. This is typical of the film's outlook: neither side is patronised by the filmmakers, both are satirised with gentle winsomeness.



Bodega Bay Northern California. One of the settings for the fictional Gloucester Island. Very little of the film was actually shot in Massachusetts.

As Alexi is left to guard the Whitakers the remaining Russians head for the port to steal the boat, but instead their presence starts garbled rumours of a Russian invasion and the Americans divide between a makeshift militia lead by American Legion veteran, control freak, would-be cold war warrior and chief paranoid Fendall Hawkins (Paul Ford) and the calmer, sceptical police chief Mattocks. Hawkins supplies moments of literal slapstick with his sabre, but fortunately the

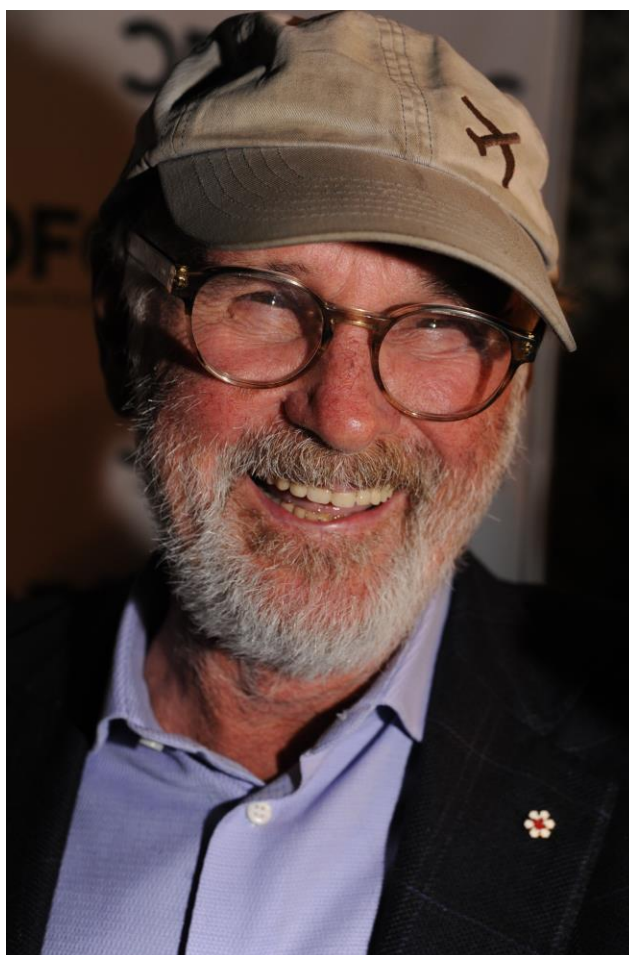
writer William Rose and director Norman Jewison keep these brief and ensure that they are only moments: the best way to use slapstick. Like the subtle, gentle, whimsical humour that pervades the film, slapstick also needs a contrast.



The townsfolk gather for the Russian threat

Some of the loudest laughs before a cinema audience came not from the slapstick but from the ironies. One such was when the hiding Russians hear church music from Sunday service, being baffled by the strange sound start to guess who the composer is. The answer “Tchaikovsky” brought the house down. At the climax both sides overcome fears and are united in their humanity. The islanders end up protecting the Russians from their own air force.

Audiences liked that and the film in general, but the American government did not: they refused to supply a submarine. The film crew had to build a replica. Fifty years on the topical issues have gone, but the film’s appeal remains.



Norman Jewison

