

THUNDERBALL

Directed by Terence Young

Produced by Kevin McClory

Distributed by United Artists

Released in 1965

Banked by a critical mass of hot-ember hysteria fueled by *Goldfinger*, the James Bondian juggernaut consumed the cinema-going public that Christmas of 1965—*Thunderball* was here, "The Biggest Bond of All!". James Bond was now in Panavision; in France, Britain, and the Bahamas; in scuba shorts and Savile Row suits; under water, in the sky; deadly, wry, and imperturbable; surrounded by a bevy of preternaturally attractive women; and outfitted with enough gadgets to bedevil anyone who told him 'no.' Bond was a miracle of the Atomic Age, the King of Calm, the Last Cool Man Standing.

Credit for *Thunderball*'s expectant audience was due in large part to the success of *Goldfinger*, the most beloved of Bond films. *Goldfinger* boasts a cinema-pioneering use of the laser; incredible dialogue ("Do you expect me to talk?" / "No, Mr. Bond, I expect you to die."); an admirable bull of a henchman (Oddjob); the series's best scheme (break into Fort Knox but don't rob it—nuke it); a comely trio of blond companions for our James, the first killed in jaw-dropping fashion—the second, in head-chopping fashion; and the first Bond gadget car, Aston Martin's DB-5.

But the movie is wanting in several ways—in characterization, nuance, and scope it disappoints. Felix Leiter is a croaky bureaucratic hack, Bond is a prisoner for a third of the story, Goldfinger explains his scheme to the gangsters (only to gas them minutes later), and Bond cavorts about the Fontainebleau in a baby-blue get-up more suitable for a freakishly huge toddler.

There are no character arcs save for Pussy Galore's, and while her shift from rigid lesbian to breathless barn tart is rendered on-screen, her shift from enemy to ally (deciding to switch the canisters and warn the government) is rendered off-screen. (Really, Bond should have just killed Pussy and Mai Ling on the flight to America, but, instead, he just makes wry comments, orders a martini, and dons a suit.) Goldfinger seems to never learn his lesson—by film's end, he's still trusting Pussy at the controls and talking Bond's ear off instead of just capping the cocky Limey.

Thunderball has its share of foibles, too. But it boasts great action, more distinguished characterizations, and it is the first film wherein we are granted a privileged look into the dark corners of Bond's psyche. The difference between the films may best be seen in the contrasting treatments of a similar situation. When Bond exits the water at the opening of *Goldfinger*, and, completing his mission to set the explosives, removes his sleek wetsuit to reveal a white tuxedo, the humor is too broad. In *Thunderball*, when Bond, after almost getting killed by Vargas's grenades, emerges from the surf, he discards his wetsuit to reveal a plain polo shirt. This transition works much better. It's all in a single shot, at a long distance. And the shirt merely helps Bond blend in innocuously. It doesn't make a statement. It's not a joke—it's a realistic

distillation of what Bond's life is really like; he's a *secret* agent. People don't know what he does. He risks his life for little glory and garners more punishment than reward.

And the camera slung around Bond's neck completes the capsized tourist cover. But the camera is actually a spy gadget that takes infrared underwater photos. Thus, Bond's secrets are in plain sight, the best place to hide them. (In the same way Bond [almost] never adopts an alias or disguise, but announces to the world that he is "Bond, James Bond.")

Stepping from the surf to the beach to the road in a few generous strides, Bond hitchhikes (not very glamorous!) because he needs a ride back. In *Goldfinger* he heads over to the local dive, severely overdressed, to bed one of his gal-pals; Bond hasn't suffered any hardship when he transitions out of the mission. And his new outfit (replete with red carnation) is a little too cute. In contrast, *Thunderball* presents Bond as a man who can be stylish but can innocuously fit in right after a mission is completed.

Bond may not be as smug in *Thunderball* as he is in *Goldfinger*, but he is almost as imperturbable. It would be nice to think that Bond puts up a brave face through the first half of the story, that he knows the stakes his nation is playing for. Otherwise, he's insultingly cavalier about all this. He's facing a momentous challenge. If the West gives in to S.P.E.C.T.R.E.'s demands and pays the ransom, they cannot ensure the nuclear bombs are returned. They'd be held to perpetual blackmail. But if the U.S. and Britain refuse to pay, S.P.E.C.T.R.E. will detonate one bomb. The news blackout will collapse and the West will be forced by a panicky, irate populace to pay. One city will lie in ruins and S.P.E.C.T.R.E. will retain the capacity to do it again. So the battle can't be won by paying up, nor by calling their bluff. S.P.E.C.T.R.E. must be thwarted.

Any time one side to a conflict has a great advantage in technology or resources, if the other side seizes the opponent's weaponry, the major power has armed his enemy and a certain victory has devolved into a stalemate (think Viet Cong with American M-16 rifles or the Taliban with CIA-provided Stinger missiles). The only way around this problem is to not make, or not employ, weapons; or to produce weapons that can only be used by a friendly party. (Curiously, a later 007 extravaganza [*Licence To Kill*] develops this idea with an 'optical palm-reader' 'signature gun'.)

Nuclear weapons are so very complicated and so requiring of maintenance that black market transfers out of the old Soviet Union may not have yet resulted in a rogue nuclear blast merely because the weapons are too old and the Islamic terrorists too ignorant.

We never learn what motivates the Polish physicist Dr. Kutze (a minor deficiency [which is addressed in the similar Dr. Metz character in *Diamonds Are Forever*]). Based on Largo's brief exchange with him when Kutze first inspects the nuclear bomb fuses, it could be money. We do know that Pelazzi, posing as NATO pilot Francois Derval, just wants money. His employers at S.P.E.C.T.R.E. don't just want money; that's too plebian. They want power. Strangely, money can't give power on its own; venal people like Pelazzi are necessary to violate their duties and take shortcuts to Hell. Only then can money bring power.

The plot threads of the S.P.E.C.T.R.E. threat, Bond's attraction to Domino, and Largo's oppression of Domino, are united once Bond and Domino talk on the beach. This is a great

scene—here Bond finally lets down his guard, and the Domino character is, at last, vindicated as the bona fide female lead.

Once Domino and Bond surface after their scuba sex and Bond has extracted the stinger from Domino's foot, she remarks that her brother Francois is the only other man who has ever made her cry. The happy mood collapses—Domino thinking Bond wants to call the whole thing off and she trying to act like it was her idea. (She's obviously been in this situation countless times before.) He returns to the subject of her brother. She, like he's violating a sanctum of her privacy more private than her privates, snaps, "What about him!?" Bond wordlessly hands over the tags and watch; his hand, just slightly, atremble. To explain the twisted business and hide his own tears at causing her more pain, Bond dons sunglasses and launches into the sad tale. Now, here's the point: When she dismisses his sexual love as a way to buy her allegiance, he angrily protests, "Look, Largo had your brother murdered. Or it was on his orders. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of people will die, and very soon, if you don't help me."

Are Bond's true feelings coming through? Are we finally seeing the pressure he's under to rescue his nation—the world, even—from this nuclear menace? He remarked earlier, when London appeared to agree to terms by arranging for Big Ben to strike seven times at 6 p.m., that they were "obviously stalling for time." But what makes him so sure? He'd already heard the Foreign Secretary discuss the possibility that the ransom would have to be paid. Surely Bond must know that Her Majesty's Government is not as strong as Bond himself if the supercilious Foreign Secretary is a fair representation of the temperament of Britain's leadership. Were they stalling for time, or had they already lost hope?

M hates to admit it but they have no alternative—they must pay up. He put his hopes in Bond, but Bond seems to have let him down.

We want Bond to come through for his boss and to put the insufferable, condescending Foreign Secretary in his place. But Bond doesn't know any of this is going on. So we feel more pressure for Bond to succeed than he does himself.

But Bond could be lying to Domino—does he think that nobody is going to die but that he must lie to her in order to secure her assistance? Since Domino is risking her life by going back on board the *Disco Volante* with that Geiger counter, we can only hope that he isn't. But it is easy to draw the conclusion that if S.P.E.C.T.R.E. isn't stopped now, it's only a matter of time before they, or efforts to stop them, cause the death of the many thousands that Bond foresees.

The beach scene ties several plot elements together, but a better example of how the film draws together multiple planes of action in a way that isn't distracting comes once the will-Bond-bed-Fearing? and will-Bond-get-revenge? subplots are resolved. Bond leaves the Sitz Bath, where he's just locked Count Lippe in the electric bulb box. We hold on the door for a few seconds (to ease the transition to a new tone and a new story line) then slowly fade into a shot of Nurse Fearing getting the mink glove treatment from Bond. The scene lasts just 11 seconds. We cut to a car heading left to right. As the camera follows it, we pick up Count Lippe wearing tweeds, making a public phone call outside a building that isn't Shrublands. Now we cut to a bedroom with a phone ringing. (So far, we've gone from Bond to a character we know only because his path crossed Bond's, to a red-haired woman on a bed who is somehow connected to

Count Lippe.) This scene, where Derval is killed and Pelazzi demands more money, lasts about three minutes. We now follow Palazzi as he rides in a car that goes from right to left, entering the air base. A short montage carried along by three wipes gets Palazzi into the Vulcan bomber. The planes soar into the air. With a hard cut, we go back to the mink glove (the Bond-Fearing scene before felt too short—now we're finishing it). The airplane roar disrupts Bond and Fearing's romantic mood (and nicely symbolizes how the NATO flight-gone-wrong will cut short Bond's health spa getaway). Bond, to shut out the noise, closes the window and while doing so sees Count Lippe sneaking around with a corpse. Bond goes into action.

So the chain of edits comes full circle—we began with Bond leaving Lippe; now we end with Bond going off to intercept him. Only five minutes have elapsed. Many new story elements have been introduced while constantly linking them to what has already been established to ease the transition.

Sadly, the last quarter of the movie, all the business about where the bombs are going, is a bid muddied. We have Bond rescuing the damsel only to be rescued by the damsel, which is a nice twist. And we have the spectacle of death and aggression that is the underwater battle, which is just a lot of sound and fury, signifying nothing. (But, interestingly, only underwater do men still go to war at close quarters. It's a real throwback to another time.)

Overall, the editing in *Thunderball* is excellent, but the second half cutting choices emphasize excitement at the expense of clarity.

Fiona Volpe is a wonder, a woman both steely cold and fiery hot. With Derval we established that Fiona is willing to use her body to ensnare a man. But when she turns up in the suite adjoining Bond's, we realize she enjoys bedding men before she has them killed. Is she a man-hater or just a sadist?

Her best scene comes soon after Bond and Fiona have progressed from bathtub to brass headboard. Bond tells her he'd like to have a talk. She assumes a subservient and dutiful air. Then Bond discovers Largo's men waiting out in the hall; but it's too late—Fiona has her pistol trained on Bond. They discuss the indelicacy of vanity—both in jewelry (the S.P.E.C.T.R.E. ring) and sex. He tries to protest that he could barely tolerate their brass-bed exertions. But his eyes betray him. She, offended at the idea *he* would use sex as a weapon (to turn evildoers into 00-angels), angrily responds that she will not be turned. Sex means nothing to her and neither does James Bond.

Like Fiona, Largo's character is also nicely delineated by action. When we first see him he scowls at the Paris cop who mistakenly orders him to move on. Then Largo crosses the street when he should have waited for the approaching car to pass. Largo waits for nobody.

Later, when Pelazzi is struggling to get out of his harness there in the Vulcan bomber on the ocean floor, Largo waves at the poor sap twice—first, *hello*; second, *goodbye*. And after cutting his air hose, Largo doesn't even wait for the man to die before retrieving the fuses. He wants to stick it to this guy, bad. (No extorting the extortionists!) Also, when Quist is ordered thrown to the sharks, Largo kisses his S.P.E.C.T.R.E. ring. It's like he doesn't enjoy the cruel decisions he must make, but it's necessary to maintain discipline and guarantee success. To Largo it's not murder—he's just a dutiful soldier of S.P.E.C.T.R.E.

Strangely, when Largo's men aren't guilty of some failure, he lets them die with no show of ceremony or remorse—the guy in the shark tank with Bond (Largo engages the metal pool cover); the man tussling with Bond in the hidden underwater bomb chamber (Largo seals it off); and when the *Disco Volante* 'jettisons cocoon,' Largo leaves half of his men to the mercy of descending gunboats and cruisers (whose sailors aren't feeling too merciful).

Largo and Fiona share one scene. While Bond and Leiter snoop overheard in their helicopter, Largo and Fiona shoot skeet. She explains why Bond must not be hurt (his government would jump to very accurate conclusions) and chastises Largo (chastises the second most powerful man in S.P.E.C.T.R.E.) for his jealousy of, and "hastiness" to seek the death of, Bond.

So, o.k., killing Bond is a bad idea.

Not quite, for now she turns the tables and says that when the time's right, *she* will kill him, implying that Largo isn't man enough to actually get the job done! Largo, not bearing to look at his tormentor, turns away.

Really, it's a wonder she hasn't seduced all of S.P.E.C.T.R.E. and seized control herself. Nobody can stop her—except Bond.

Fiona's death is a masterpiece of excitement-in-miniature. Bond, after being shot, has been cornered by Largo's crew at the Kiss Kiss Club. Fiona cuts in and they dance. Despite Bond's humor, there's something poetic and sad about these two people, who hours before shared the greatest intimacy known to man and who now want to kill each other but are reunited by necessity (Fiona doesn't want a scene; Bond needs time to strategize). And so, they dance. Finally Bond realizes what's afoot—he spots the revolver emerging behind curtains next to the flailing conga drummer. But Bond doesn't cower. He thinks some more! And, with no margin for error, he acts, swinging Fiona around to take a bullet through her back and straight into her heart, a bullet that passes through Bond's fingers, his digits providing a handy cover for the gathering pool of blood.

After Domino and Fiona, there is a third piece of Bahamian eye-candy—Paula, the only important female character Bond *doesn't* sleep with. At the boat (and later at the market), Paula knowingly teases Bond on whether he will make "contact" with Domino. And just before she's kidnapped, she, expecting that it's Bond knocking on her door, smoothes her dress and checks her lipstick before opening it. She never really has a chance. There's just too many women available to Bond. *Thunderball* is high-gloss red-light entertainment (*Girls! Girls! Girls!*). The movie is loaded with girls, and many remain lonely. The reception clerk who pines after Bond as he ascends the hotel stairs, the impromptu dance partner at the Kiss Kiss Club who is dismayed when Bond's "wife" shows up, the woman Bond checks out checking him out when he enters the casino, the French assistant in the film's teaser, the forlorn girl at Shrublands who jealously watches Bond walk off with Nurse Fearing after Bond triggers the fire alarm, and, as always, Moneypenny—all want their chance with Bond, and are denied.

But why does Bond go on sowing heartache? Why doesn't he just retire at film's end and take Domino as his wife? (Bond will wed, two films later, but now is not the time.) Strangely, Bond awakens feelings of love in Domino that had been obliterated by that savage,

Largo. Her yearning for Bond is most evident when they dance and she comments that Bond is a different man, a kind man, and she can tell by the way he holds her as they sway. She goes out of her way to have sex with him, in the only place where she can avoid Largo's all-seeing henchmen—underwater! But at film's end, after she has killed Largo and saved Bond's life, he just tosses off two jokes, they jump overboard, and he sets to rigging them for the Sky Hook. They don't talk; she just shakes her head like she can't comprehend how Bond is so tech-savvy and indefatigable. They could cling to each other, she could cry, and they could declare their love. Even if they really didn't mean it, the emotion of such a circumstance, with the catharsis of the mission complete and her tormentor dead, should awaken great devotion in these lovers. But they just sit there without a word.

Obviously Bond can't have the same girl from the last movie carrying over to the next. But when the filmmakers attempt to strengthen the female characters, they run into a snag. Bond and Domino should be more involved with each other, more emotionally attached, when the film ends than they were in the middle. That's the nature of relationships. They progress. With the passing of a few more days, with Largo dead and S.P.E.C.T.R.E.'s plans thwarted, they could drift apart; maybe their relationship is nothing more than a mere survival instinct rooted in stress.

But they wouldn't be growing apart just a minute after the intersecting challenges that united them have been surmounted. If they never had their scene on the beach or their dance, there'd be nothing to their relationship but naked lust. So we end up with the incongruity of a soul-searching relationship that is over before it began so Bond won't be saddled for the next adventure.

As sure as death and taxes, Bond movies endure because the hero's uncanny ability to flourish complements the zeitgeist of this Age of Ages, where the Atomic Age succumbs to the Space Age before falling to the Information Age. What we want and cannot get, Bond handily parlays into triumphs sans consequence. This idealized secret agent's world of glamour, adventure, suspense, action, and sex, so successfully captured in *Thunderball*, perpetuates the moment; Bond is our escape from every tomorrow.