

Armando Iannucci, dir., *The Death of Stalin*, with Steve Buscemi, Simon Russell Beale, and Jeffrey Tambor. (Neuilly-sur-Seine, France: Gaumont, Main Journey, Quad Productions, France Cinema, La Cie Cinématographique, Panache Productions, AFPI, eOne Films, 2017), film.¹

With the specter of Russian meddling on the minds of some of the most powerful figures in Washington, one would be hard pressed to find a director more fitting or a film more ironically relevant than Armando Iannucci's *The Death of Stalin*. Based on the French graphic novel, *La mort de Staline* by² Fabien Nury and Thierry Robin, the creator of HBO's *Veep* hilariously reimagines the power struggle to become the next Soviet leader in the wake of the dictator's sudden demise. Centered around the planning and execution of the funeral, Iannucci and co-screenwriter David Schneider's political satire manages to portray both the abject brutality and hilarious pitfalls of Stalin's totalitarian policies, aptly dubbing their movie, "A Comedy of Terrors."

The film opens in March 1953 to a beautifully tragic symphony played before a repressively docile crowd. The audience is quickly introduced to Stalin's brutal control over his nation in the form of an impossible request: produce a recorded version of a performance that was broadcasted live. Stalin rules with an iron fist, demanding complete unanimity from his committee in all decisions, from systematic purges to the regimented delegation of his staff. So, when he suffers a massive stroke alone in his room, it's those same rules and regulations that ultimately lead to his death. The audience is then introduced to some of the most powerful men in Soviet history: Moscow Party leader, Nikita Khrushchev, Head of the NKVD Lavrenti Beria, and Deputy General Secretary Georgi Malenkov. Schemes, murder plots, and secret trials ensue as the three men work to win over their fellow party members, Stalin's children, and the head of the Red Army, General Georgi Zhukov (played hilariously by Jason Isaac) in their bid to become the next General Secretary. Although this is a slapstick comedy with

¹ The film was released in 2018 in the United States and in 2017 in the United Kingdom.

funny one-liners and hysterical performances from Steve Buscemi, Simon Russell Beale, and Jeffrey Tambor, the film never shies away from highlighting the violence, cruelty or brutality of the regime. The audience witnesses NKVD purges in between shots of party leaders wrestling, watching cowboy movies and drunkenly stuffing tomatoes in their pockets. One of the best scenes is the funeral itself as the party leaders, each flanking Stalin's coffin, attempt to project honor and gravitas while bickering with each other over specific policy initiatives, such as reconciliation with the Church. A refreshing characteristic about the film is that nobody attempts a Russian accent. Considering the diversity of the Russian population, it makes sense to use a variety of English-speaking dialects to reflect that diversity. One of the only criticisms the film catches from historians is its very loose license with the timeline of Soviet history. Events that happened years before or took place months after Stalin's death seem to take place in the span of a few days. Timeline alterations or obvious dramatizations of events can be easily forgiven for the sake of moving the plot forward. Other mistakes, such as the fact that Lavrenti Beria was not the Head of the NKVD at the time of Stalin's death, or that his trial and execution took place months later, become necessary changes in order to simplify complicated party developments.

As films on repressive totalitarian regimes go, *The Death of Stalin* is probably the most entertaining film one will find on the subject. Despite being a comedy, the film never makes light of its subject matter, at times over-exaggerating certain events to hammer home the point that life under Stalinist policies could be horrific. It holds off on a political message, and it does not ask us to choose a side. The audience is inherently on Khrushchev's side but that's less due to any type of political agenda and more because Beria was a pedophilic madman and Malenkov was his spineless puppet. Khrushchev is simply the best choice from a list of bad options. With Russia at the forefront of the minds of many Americans and the 2020 election looming over head, *The Death of Stalin* is a weirdly poignant film. It reminds the audience that there are growing similarities between our own governments and the totalitarian regimes we used to stand against.

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