

## The Death of Stalin

Based on a French graphic novel *La mort de Staline*, “The Death of Stalin” depicts the Soviet power struggles following the death of dictator Joseph Stalin (Adrian McLoughlin) in 1953. The death scene comes early, in the context of a Moscow radio concert that has to be summarily repeated because the Great Man did not hear the live performance. The extravagant lengths to which the program director (Paddy Considine) must go to recreate the transmission is done in a Keystone Kops manner that signals the ribald tone of much of this picture, while at the same time the sequence’s gripping paranoia about placating Stalin captures the mordant side of the film. These two facets—goofy and scathing—are carefully juggled throughout the movie directed by British writer/director Armando Iannucci.

After the concert, Stalin has a massive stroke in his office, but his night guards are too frightened to go in to see if the premier is OK. By morning, the parade of sycophants from the party’s Central Committee stumbles in to find the old man dead, lying in his own urine. The parade is led by Deputy Party Chairman Malenkov (Jeffrey Tambor), party leader Khrushchev (Steve Buscemi), Vice Chairman Molotov (Michael Palin), and secret police chief Lavrenti Beria (Simon Russell Beale), among others.

Nonplussed, these panicked leaders begin immediately struggling to both undercut and one-up each other to seize and maintain power. Among them, Malenkov, in line for the head post, is a mincing nonentity, the hustling Khrushchev is a profane brute, and Molotov is the ultimate party-line toady (he rejoices that the Party has placed his wife in prison). Only Beria, an unrelieved swine, seems to have a clear plan to power: by killing or jailing as many enemies as possible.

Tangentially based on real events, the film takes plenty of license, though, as Iannucci has indicated, some elements, like the repeat concert episode and the reluctant guards cited above, really happened and are too zany *not* to be included. Verisimilitude, though, is hardly the point of “The Death of Stalin.” The Anglo-American cast speaks a mash up of accents: Stalin seems to be a cockney, Buscemi spouts in caustic Brooklynese, Palin uses a semi-tosh Britspeak, and Beale (a Shakespearean actor) speaks in a corrosive growl. Perhaps the funniest line deliveries of all are those of Field Marshall Georgy Zhukhov, played imperiously by the medal-laden Jason Isaacs, whose hilarious putdowns are delivered in an accent somewhere between Yorkshire and Scotland.

Iannucci’s depiction of the bizarre struggle among the committee members at times seems like a zany update of the Marx(ist) Brothers, with the pratfalls and one-liners mingling uncomfortably with the darkest sides of Stalin’s legacy and the vicious practices of Beria. It’s a delicate line the film treads, ready giggles tempered by chilly wincings—sometimes in the same scene! In all, it makes for a heady stew.

*(The film is rated “R” for raunch, tough swearing, and nasty violence. It and runs 107 minutes.)*

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**Director Iannucci Discusses “Stalin”**

British writer/director Armando Iannucci is best known for his caustic HBO comedy series, "Veep." But prior to that success, he scored with a droll feature "In the Loop" (2009), a satire that lampooned politicians and bureaucracies on both sides of the Atlantic. Now, he has turned his attention, somewhat surprisingly, to an offbeat piece of history in the pitch-black farce, "The Death of Stalin."

Iannucci, in DC March 15 to promote his film, spoke to the audience at a preview screening. Asked about the original idea for the film, he said he was thinking about doing a story about a fictional contemporary dictator when he ran across the French comic novel and decided: "This is the film I wanted to make." The subject was "so crazy, that comedy is the only way you can deal with it."

The film, shot from June to August 2016, involved doing some on-the-ground research in Moscow because, he said, "I wanted to get the look of it right" and recreate "a sense of anxiety." While most of the picture was shot on English sets and locations, the filmmakers did shoot some exteriors in the Ukraine to get the appearance of Soviet architecture.

The film, which opened in London this past October, was also on track to open in Russia early this year. Iannucci himself was in Moscow to meet with the Russian press and some selected screenings had already taken place. Then, days before its general release, "The Death of Stalin" was banned from Russian cinemas.

The director said he "wanted Joseph Stalin to be seen not as the tall, strong man" so many Russians still fantasize about but to cast a short, mundane person "to contrast the great 'leader' with the real man."

He acknowledged that the film is hardly historically accurate, but that the lunacy of Stalin's rule was such that certain untoward incidents in the film really happened, such as the hurried re-run of the concert program and "Stalin showing late-night Westerns to Politburo members after lengthy dinners" to get them to reveal themselves.

Now that he has dipped into historical material for the first time, Iannucci was asked about his next project: he is going to film "David Copperfield" with Anglo-Indian actor Dev Patel.