

The Death of Stalin

Armado Iannucci UK/FR /CA/BE 2017 106m



Iannucci shows that even people who were due to be executed as part of Stalin's purges felt distraught and adrift over his passing. This is not a fanciful fiction created by a modern-day comedian. Stalin's grip on power, his control over the life of his nation, was so complete that many of his victims did mourn his death. And as much as we may want to dismiss such phenomena as the distant convulsions of a long-gone era, recent events suggest that such attitudes are not so remote after all. The genocidal Stalin is a hero again in Russia, with approval ratings through the roof; he polls ahead of Pushkin and Lenin and Peter the Great and even Putin the Poisoner. (Iannucci's film has been banned in Russia; then again, so was Seth Rogen's *The Interview*.) Meanwhile, a host of imitators and wannabes have sprouted up around the world — brutal, ridiculous strongmen who think nothing of imprisoning tens of thousands for vague crimes of association and turning paranoid co-dependency into a national ethos. Beyond that, many of Stalin's techniques — the casual rewriting of history; conformist double-speak; the codification of constantly-shifting politicized assertions as alternate, equally viable truths — have infected our discourse in the U.S., on both the left and the right.

The *Death of Stalin* would be a brilliant, harrowing film even without all that contemporary resonance. It's filled with the kind of rapid-fire intramural contempt that Iannucci has made his stock-in-trade: His films and shows (*In the Loop*, *The Thick of It*, *Veep*) revel in the loathing and vitriol expressed by political figures at others who are ostensibly on the same side. It's fun stuff, but in a deeply corrosive way — daring to suggest that people engaged in a soul-sickening endeavor will find, well, their souls sickened. But here, he stretches his style, too, depicting the Stalinist police actions with a combination of action-movie kineticism and grisly slapstick, turning bullet-to-the-head NKVD executions into choke-on-your-laughter punchlines. It's all part of the plan: He riles you up, makes you cackle, then sends your mind somewhere terrible.

The film is also shockingly accurate. Sure, Iannucci gives his actors leeway with accents — so that Steve Buscemi’s awkwardly scheming Khrushchev sounds curiously like a mousy Brooklyn wise-ass, and Simon Russell Beale’s murderous, pedophile secret police chief Lavrentiy Beria sounds like a smug British politician, and Adrian McLoughlin’s Stalin has a snide, cockney accent. There are liberties taken with the story, but not as many as you might think. The Death of Stalin captures the historical reality of the Politburo’s double-crosses, all played out in an atmosphere of breathtaking, almost mystical paranoia. Sending his assembled minions into paroxysms of misty-eyed interpretation over what he could have possibly meant — is an actual thing that happened. As is the fact that, as they hovered around Stalin’s bed, these men would interrupt their pissy arguments over his misdeeds to grovel before him whenever he briefly drifted back into consciousness.

It’s all so simultaneously horrible and hilarious that any question of whether it’s okay to laugh at this stuff — which, sadly, is the kind of question that gets asked these days — becomes moot. As Stanley Kubrick did with Dr. Strangelove, Iannucci has built a satire not by twisting the truth but by nudging reality just a few inches further in the direction it was already going. It should not be incumbent on people of good sense to hold their laughter in the face of such absurd evil. If anything, laughter should be a requirement — because only in well-observed ridicule can we sometimes find a power strong enough to put such monsters in their places. And make no mistake about it: These are monsters, not ghosts. The Death of Stalin might be set in 1953, but you don’t have to look hard at it to see today.

Bilge Ebiri - Village Voice

Armando Iannucci has frequently been admired for the uncanny prescience of his satire, and indeed his depictions of the mendacity and incompetence at the heart of contemporary politics often seem to be several steps ahead of the game. His latest comic masterpiece The Death of Stalin, however, demonstrates that the farcical contortions of morality and logic by which greedy men seek power form a pattern as old as politics itself. Here, the post-war Soviet Union becomes a laboratory where the chemical elements of ambition, stupidity and ruthlessness are combined to make a particularly dangerous and volatile compound. It’s absolutely hilarious... but also, people die.

The root of the comedy is the cult of personality that Stalin has erected around himself, based on the idea that the tiniest affront to his authority can result in instant death. This is concisely demonstrated in the film’s opening segment, which shows the dictator (Adrian McLoughlin) telephoning a radio station to say that he has enjoyed a Mozart concerto and would like a recording of it; panic ensues when the producer (Paddy Considine) realises that no recording has been made. The terrified conductor passes out, another is dragged from his bed to conduct the piece in his pyjamas, and the deeply alarmed audience are locked in the hall so that the concert can be replayed with an identical sense of atmosphere.

This setup – transferred directly from the opening of the graphic novel by Fabien Nury and Thierry Robin on which the film is based – beautifully encapsulates the problem with Stalin’s creaking regime: even before his death, he has created a power vacuum by turning himself into a kind of mythical creature. When, shortly afterwards, he is felled by a stroke, there is a long pause while members of the Presidium muster the courage to utter the treasonous thought that their infallible leader was, in fact, mortal.

Lisa Mullen - Sight and Sound

OTHER VIEWS

The Death Of Stalin is superbly cast, and acted with icy and ruthless force by an A-list lineup. There are no weak links. Each has a plum role; each squeezes every gorgeous horrible drop.

Peter Bradshaw -The Guardian

The Death Of Stalin isn't quite as pointed or rat-a-tat funny as In The Loop (or Veep at its best), but its application of [Iannucci's] signature barbed comic voice to such grim history (executions are a constant source of gallows humor) packs its own punch.

The A.V. Club A.A. Dowd

Though sporadically brilliant, this too-often uneven send-up of Russian politics attempts to maintain the rapid-fire, semi-improvisational style of Iannucci's earlier work...while situating such madness within an elaborately costumed and production-designed period milieu.

Peter Debruge -Variety

