

The folly of a youth: The Trotsky

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23 June 2010

Written and directed by Jacob Tierney

One always hopes for the best when a movie deals with a major historical figure, yet few manage to illuminate their subjects in a meaningful way. *The Trotsky*, released last month across Canada following its debut at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2009, is a youthful comedy that sidesteps any such challenge, setting its sights rather lower.

The movie's writer and director, Jacob Tierney, makes clear that—despite its title—his film is decidedly not about Trotsky or socialism, but is simply “dessert”. “It's a soufflé, you know,” he explains, “and people tend to leave the theatres smiling and that's more than I could have ever hoped for”.

But then why Trotsky? Tierney, now 30, who calls himself a “red diaper baby”, professes an early interest in the Russian revolutionary and his politics, but assures us that is all behind him.

Tierney began his career in film at the age of eight in Montreal, acting in dozens of productions, and this one, his second feature film as director, also deals with the problems of today's youth. His first feature, *Twist* (2003), was a modern-day spin on Dickens' *Oliver Twist*.

The Trotsky has had a good deal of press coverage in Canada as a home-grown achievement, and was one of seven films offered “on demand” for home-viewing in a joint effort of the Tribeca Film Festival and Comcast. Considering the film's very modest merits, its relative success says as much about the weakness of the current slate of releases as anything else.

The lead character in the film, played convincingly by Jay Baruchel as the son of a wealthy Montreal businessman, imagines himself to be the reincarnation of Leon Trotsky after he discovers they share a birth

name, Leon Bronstein.

The film opens with the teenager staging a hunger strike at his father's factory, demanding a full-hour lunch break for the workers. The ensuing caricatured picture of family life, we are told, bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Trotsky himself.

After his son denounces him as a fascist and a landowner, Leon's father (played as a hapless victim by Saul Rubinek) cuts off the youth's financial support—forcing him to transfer from an elite private school to a still relatively affluent public one. Leon sets about confronting the high school administration with demands that attract the attention of the media, along with a depressed bunch of misfits who have come to fill in as student leaders.

Through Leon's contact with a reformed 1960s radical played by Michael Murphy, we meet a parallel version of Trotsky's first love in the form of the scholarly Alexandra Leith (Emily Hampshire), who at first spurns the adolescent's interest but is eventually won over by his ardour. (“I'm just very determined,” he explains, having broken into her apartment.) Hampshire delivers a strong performance, but is both too serious and not serious enough to make the role work comically.

Despite some other notable talents—Colm Feore is fearsome as the high school principal, and, in a rare appearance, Geneviève Bujold delivers an amusing turn as an establishment villain—*The Trotsky* is terribly thin fare. Its biggest problem is that it never gets beyond the initial joke of our hero's earnest folly, which isn't enough to carry the story.

Such as it is, the story is fairly predictable right up to its triumphant ending, and the performances of the cast don't compensate for an unconvincing commitment to the story and its characters on the part of the writer-director.

Kids these days

Despite his disclaimers, Tierney's film nevertheless reveals some definite political conceptions about present political difficulties, which for him find their most acute expression in the supposed lassitude of today's youth.

At a critical moment in the story, the lead character poses what he sees as a burning question for the younger generation: are they apathetic—or simply bored? This formulation doesn't look very deep or lead very far. The younger generation has not as yet erupted in mass protest, it's true, despite many warning signs, but this can only be explained on the basis of politics and history...in other words, on precisely those questions Tierney regards with nostalgic affection but ultimately dismisses.

The film asks us to follow our hero as he sets out to prove that the youth of today are not inherently indifferent, but merely insufficiently inspired, and he does this by offering them a truly world-historical cause—a campaign for their own student union.

For Tierney, the goal itself is apparently incidental to the bigger challenge of getting people involved in something—or anything. As he says “Engagement is rewarded, and participation is its own reward.” This is banal, and untrue.

In his own fashion, the writer-director has put his finger on one of the reasons so many youth appear apathetic, although he doesn't realize it. Young people want something profound and all-encompassing to believe in and pursue, a cause that promises to turn the world upside down. In the end, Tierney and his Baruchel-Trotsky offer more of the same: small potatoes. No wonder no one looks genuinely engaged, even during the film's climactic moments.

Should anyone be looking to learn something useful about Trotsky's life from Tierney's film, which is perhaps unlikely, he or she will be disappointed. Although the writer-director concentrates his efforts on comically reincarnating the revolutionary, presumably some of Tierney's attitudes toward the original figure come through: in Baruchel's Bronstein, we are left with a serious, but harmless young buffoon.

Tierney's conception seems to be that comedy cannot illuminate anything important, that it is condemned to

be nothing but “a soufflé,” but there is a long tradition in the cinema of comic films doing just that. Of course, that requires genuine thinking and hard work, not simply taking the path of least resistance, as Tierney has done.

The filmmaker also seems to believe that since this is “comedy,” he has no responsibility to historical truth. He remakes “Trotsky,” perhaps inevitably, in the image of a “left” protester in 2010, a staunch advocate of Hugo Chavez's Venezuela and trade unionism!

Conveying political ideas in any artistic medium is challenging. Making a successful comedy out of the big historical issues and figures of the twentieth century was beyond Tierney's reach.

Social pressures and processes also no doubt play a role. The young director himself admits that in the course of his film career, “the people I've met have tended to be from the other side.” It is not surprising that he discovered that ideas which truly challenge the political status quo were not entirely welcome in the film market.

One might be forgiven for observing that, whatever other factors may have been at work, Tierney's decision to abandon the more radical views of his youth opened up opportunities for commercial success that he would not likely otherwise have had. Recognizing the pressures exerted on artists does not, however, excuse their conformity.

Reportedly, Tierney wrote a first version of this film as a serious drama at the age of 19. It is hard not to wonder what sort of film he might have made if he had pursued his vision at the time. The film he began might well have failed, but it would likely have been a more genuine work than the one we have.



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