

Toronto International Film Festival: Part 4

***The Death of Stalin, The Other Side of Everything, Insyriated*—The filmmakers’ inability to deal with complex questions, or worse**

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This is the fourth in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 7-17). Part 1 was posted September 22. Part 2 was posted September 26 and Part 3 on September 28.

Armando Iannucci’s *The Death of Stalin* is a fatally ill-conceived “black comedy” about the demise of the gravedigger of the Russian Revolution, Joseph Stalin, in March 1953. The film is not so much maliciously anti-communist as it is, above all, historically clueless.

Iannucci and fellow screenwriters David Schneider and Ian Martin present the various surviving Stalinist officials, Nikita Khrushchev, Georgy Malenkov, Vyacheslav Molotov, Anastas Mikoyan, Nikolai Bulganin and the rest, all of whom had gallons of blood on their hands, as a largely ineffectual bunch of bunglers and toadies, jockeying “comically” for position. The betrayal of the Russian Revolution was one of the greatest tragedies in world history. Iannucci’s film doesn’t begin to confront the vast significance of the events in the Soviet Union.

His work loosely bases its antics on certain real facts. In the opening sequence, Stalin (Adrian McLoughlin) telephones a Radio Moscow engineer and requests a recording of the concert that has just been played, forcing the man (Paddy Considine) to frantically round up the musicians and a new conductor, as well as a new audience, and perform the concert again.

Stalin thereupon has a stroke and goes into a coma, apparently after reading an audacious, angry note from a pianist whose family members have died in the purges. But is he dead? Khrushchev (Steve Buscemi) and the others can’t be certain for a time. What if he comes to life again? They go through various “comic” bits of business, much of it do with Stalin’s bodily fluids, while they determine what to do with the unconscious or deceased leader.

Meanwhile security chief Beria (Simon Russell Beale) continues to go about his murderous business and plots to take Stalin’s place. The latter’s official replacement, Malenkov (Jeffrey Tambor), is a nonentity and a nincompoop, in a corset. Out of the blue, Molotov (Michael Palin), the longtime Stalinist official, is presented with his wife, an “enemy of the people” suddenly released from prison, who he thought was dead. Stalin’s mad son Vassily (Rupert Friend) and dutiful daughter Svetlana (Andrea Riseborough) show up.

The acerbic, harassed Khrushchev organizes a coup against Beria, with the aid of the even more blunt Marshal Zhukov (Jason Isaacs) of the Red Army, and supervises his execution. Indeed, if the film has a “hero,” it is Khrushchev, who promises to stop the purges and executions and introduce “reform.” Much of this is played as farce, verbal or physical.

Taken in and of themselves, there are amusing lines and moments, until one remembers the general context and the historical stakes, and the laughter freezes in one’s throat. All the actors are fine at doing what they are asked to do, but what they are asked to do is terribly off the mark.

It is impossible to make sense of a film like *The Death of Stalin* except in the context of the terribly low level of historical knowledge or interest that exists in the arts at present.

Iannucci is a Scottish-born television, film and radio writer and director, responsible for *I’m Alan Partridge* (along with Steve Coogan), *The Thick of It*, *In the Loop* and *Veep*, among other efforts. Under the right circumstances, he is capable of creating very funny and even pointed satire. When it comes to bringing out the dishonesty, careerist opportunism and stupidity of garden-variety politicians, “media personalities” and other establishment figures, Iannucci probably has few equals today. He has a masterful way of setting in motion and choreographing his bumbling, sweating, inevitably lying anti-heroes.

However, when the writer-director steps outside the fairly narrow confines of parliamentary and entertainment industry backroom shenanigans, he falters badly. The second half of *In the Loop*, which satirized the British government’s complicity in the Bush administration’s drive to war in Iraq, is very weak, celebrating as it does an alliance between “progressives,” a gruff US Army general and an inexplicably liberal Deputy Secretary of State.

HBO’s *Veep* too, which treats a fictional female US vice president, finds Iannucci over his head. As we noted in a review, the series “biggest shortfall is that, for all its coarseness, it is still quite timid in its portrayal of the ugly ‘side’ of American politics.

“The series largely focuses on the minor scandals that dominate day-to-day political reporting. ... [T]here is precious little mention in *Veep* of war policy, drone strikes, bombings and assassinations, episodes

that surely consume a great deal of a real president's focus and attention."

Art and comedy have to rise to the level of the events or personalities they are treating. That is, there needs to be some artistic and intellectual correspondence between subject and object, if the work is going to succeed and endure.

Scathing political satire has a long history stretching back, if one only takes the modern era, to such works as Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in the 1720s, and Voltaire's *Candide* several decades later.

Of course, there were many political satires in the 20th century, including Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1921-23), about World War I, Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941), on the subject of Hitler's rise, and Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940). In the US too, one could point to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) or Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), among other works.

Iannucci's film is based on a French graphic novel series created by Fabien Nury and Thierry Robin. In an interview, Robin explained his interest in Stalin: "A part of my family was Communist. One of my uncles was even a fervent Stalinist. He didn't want to know anything about the reality when you explained the horrible historical events that took place in Russia under Stalin's yoke." Robin further noted that he had been affected by the work of Jean-Jacques Marie, the historian and one-time Trotskyist.

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the graphic novels, which are not comic, Iannucci has undoubtedly added his own touch. And here it is simply inappropriate and, at times, grotesque.

This sort of unseriousness is one problem. There are others.

In *The Other Side of Everything*, Serb director Mila Turajlic offers a portrait of her mother, Srbijanka Turajlic, a leading activist in the "October 5 Revolution" that brought down the Slobodan Milosevic regime in 2000. Unintentionally, it is not an attractive picture.

The central conceit of the film, which provides its title, is telling. Srbijanka Turajlic came from a privileged, upper middle class background, including relatives who were government ministers. After Tito and his Communist Party came to power in 1945, her family's large apartment was divided up and portions of it made available to poorer families. We are apparently meant to find this outrageous. A locked door that has never been opened separates Turajlic from her neighbors.

Most of the film is devoted to the overthrow of Milosevic and its aftermath. Some of the newsreel footage is interesting, including from the last chaotic and fractious congress of the Yugoslav Communist Party in 1988 and shots of protests during the 1990s.

Srbijanka Turajlic was an outspoken member of Otpor! (Resistance), an opposition group under Milosevic. The organization received several million dollars from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), International Republican Institute (IRI) and US Agency for International Development (USAID), agencies of US imperialism. In all, the Democratic Opposition of Serbia received some \$30 million to organize Milosevic's downfall.

Milosevic was a scoundrel, who had imposed free-market policies and austerity on the Yugoslav and Serb working class, but he was seen as a regional obstacle by Washington and Berlin in particular. As the WSWs noted at the time, the blather about the October 5 Revolution in Serbia as some sort of spontaneous, popular uprising was just that. "The media's aim," wrote the WSWs, "was to legitimise what they

knew to be a political coup organised by the United States government and the European powers, to ensure their undisputed control of the Balkan peninsula, in alliance with a section of Serbia's ruling elite whose politics differed in no fundamental respect from those of Milosevic.

Srbijanka Turajlic today is disillusioned. The Democratic Party, which emerged in part from Otpor!, is discredited and widely hated. The situation in Serbia is a disaster. She played a rotten role in 2000 and has learned nothing from the experience. The film principally speaks for and to upper middle class professionals who feel sorry for themselves.

Belgian filmmaker Philippe Van Leeuw's *Insyriated* takes place in a single Damascus apartment building during the course of one day. Battles are raging outside, security forces intrude and proceed to act brutally. In the absence of her husband, who cannot be reached, Oum Yazan (Palestinian actor Hiam Abbass) attempts to keep her extended family safe and intact. She has to make a number of painful decisions.

The situation is authentically presented as far as it goes, but without any historical context or indication of the forces fighting, *Insyriated* is very limited. Needless to say, the drama precludes anyone pointing to the role of the US and other powers in stoking the horrific civil war for their own purposes.

One has the unnerving feeling throughout that the film is an advertisement for "human rights" imperialism. "The situation is so terrible, the West must do something." This suspicion is confirmed by director Van Leeuw's note: "The uprising of the Syrian people started six years ago, and the war has been raging for well over five years now while the rest of the world has done nothing to stop it."

When we spoke to Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad (*Paradise Now*, *Omar*, *The Idol*) in 2013, he said he was very "depressed" by his situation. He was not able to make enough money from his artistic films. Abu-Assad told us, "If I don't compromise, I will not have enough money to eat. I don't have a big house, but still I need to pay the bills, I need this and that. I am 51 and I am worrying about how I can survive another three months, for example, with the money I have. I need more work."

It is to the shame of the current film industry that the very gifted Abu-Assad has been forced to make a thoroughly conventional work like *The Mountain Between Us*, with Kate Winslet and Idris Elba, about a photojournalist and a surgeon who "must rely on each other for survival when the small plane they share crashes in the wilderness."

To be continued



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