Armando Iannucci's *The Death of Stalin*: A fatally ill-conceived "black comedy"

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Directed and co-written by Armando Ianucci; co-written by David Schneider and Ian Martin

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 anticommunist 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 engineer (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 angry, audacious note from a pianist whose family members have died in the purges. But is he actually 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 bits of comic 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, who wears 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 Soviet Army, and supervises the security chief's 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 disastrously 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. The latter sequences, we noted in 2009, are "politically blunted and largely unfunny. Present-day geopolitics, and affairs in Washington in particular, is so surreal and swollen with threat that a certain type of essentially amiable humor, a product of and suitable for less convulsive times, simply falls short."

HBO's *Veep* too, which treats a fictional female US vice president, finds Iannucci over his head. As we noted in a 2016 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—or at least approach—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.