

Chaos of Power in Hilarious ‘The Death of Stalin’

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – If you want a film to take your mind off the current American power structure, that at the same time provides some truth to the situation, you won’t do better than “The Death of Stalin.” A monster comedic cast – including Steve Buscemi and Jeffrey Tambor – is assembled for this hilarious farce.

The setting is the Soviet Union in 1953. Josef Stalin, the Premier of the State, continues his iron-fisted rule of the region. When he drops dead, the “Central Committee” of the Communist Party must deal with the transition, which includes a funeral, relatives and their own lust for power. The film is done in the King’s English, with Buscemi and Tambor adding some American flavor, and no attempt is made to have Russian accents. It escalates into a swear-word-filled chaos, an obvious satire and symbol of modern authoritarianism. Using this horrible monster’s death (he executed 600,000 of his own people, the so-called enemies of the state) as an allegory for the pettiness of humankind – especially in the quest to “get ahead” – the film is creative and laugh-inducing cinema anarchy.

On the night before the death of Soviet Premier Josef Stalin (Adrian McLoughlin), the usual lists are made to capture and/or kill the “enemies of the state.” These orders are given by the head of the state security, Lavrenti Beria (Simon Russell Beale) and carried out by the NKVD, a secret police under his command. After Stalin suffers a stroke and dies, the Central Committee gathers to figure out what to do.



Assembled Cast of 'The Death of Stalin'

Photo credit: IFC Films

This included Georgy Malenkov (Jeffrey Tambor), deputy and next-in-line as Premier; Nikita Khrushchev (Steve Buscemi), head of the Soviet Communist Party; Vyacheslav Molotov (Michael Palin), another deputy; and Beria. This committee is charged with setting up the state funeral, plus corralling Stalin's children Svetlana and Vasily (Andrea Riseborough and Rupert Friend), while fulfilling their own ambitions.

This is based on a French graphic novel, and the frenetic word play – which has swearing that is on an epic scale – was put together by three writers, including director Armando Iannucci (writer/director on HBO's "Veep"), helming his second feature film. The dialogue sings and zings, perfect for the skeptical dirty-mouthed delivery of the great Steve Buscemi. It highlights the pettiness of power lust, reducing the important Soviet governing body into actions that are like children on a playground.

The casting is major league, why isn't Michael Palin (a Monty Python) not in more movies? His Molotov is spot on, and throws out passive-aggressiveness like one of the famous cocktails. Tambor, despite his current troubles, portrays weaselly characters like no other, and Simon Russell Beale – a popular British Shakespearian actor – gives Beria a proper amount of acid and stealth. Another British actor, Jason Isaacs, comes in late to the party as Army Marshal Zhurov and nearly steals the whole film... he is uproariously f'ed up.



Jason Isaacs is Army Marshal Zhurov in ‘The Death of Stalin’

Photo credit: IFC Films

But really the film is about power, and the use of it, and how unchecked human behavior within it is truly terrible in a if-I-don’t-laugh-I’ll-cry way. The farce meter is turned way up, and speaks truth at that volume. Men who are pampered in a seat of luxury and power don’t want to give it up, so they will basically do or say anything to make it happen. The film delivers this in hysterical ways, both funny and frightening. And the rest, the peasants and such, just had to fear death from the hands of these sociopaths. The machinations of these power plays are so similar to our atmosphere that Russia banned the film. Maybe our Prez 45 can invite his buddy Vlad Putin over for a overnight watch party.

If you like the dialoguing of “Veep” or just an unusual and funny movie, this one is a must see. While America stands on the precipice of its own insanity, it may be either reassuring or unsettling that everything old is new again.

“The Death of Stalin” is currently in release nationwide and in Chicago. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Steve Buscemi, Jeffrey Tambor, Simon Russell Beale, Michael Palin, Jason Isaacs, Andrea Riseborough and Rupert Friend. Screenplay adapted by Armando Iannucci, David Schneider, Ian Martin and Peter Fellows. Directed by Armando Iannucci. Rated “R”



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