



FILM: **THE DEATH OF STALIN**

FDG RATING: 3.2 ☺☺☺○○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Armando Iannucci: *director/co-writer*  
Steve Buscemi: *actor, Nikita Khrushchev*  
Simon Russell Beale: *actor, Lavrentiy Beria*  
Jeffrey Tambor: *actor, Georgy Malenkov*

DATE: April 22, 2018

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE DEATH OF STALIN**

The Death of Stalin is a clever, raucous political lampoon about bumbling Moscow bureaucrats, backstabbing their way to the top of the heap in an elaborate frantic power struggle to become the next Soviet leader when their tyrannical dictator, Joseph Stalin, drops dead. Among the contenders are sadistic secret police chief Beria who, accompanied by babbling CP Central Committee bigwig Malenkov (Arrested Development's Jeffrey Tambor), take charge of the situation. Moscow Party Head Nikita Khrushchev (Steve Buscemi) arrives with the rest of the Committee, except for Foreign Minister Molotov, whom Stalin added to his list of enemies the previous night.

If these names ring a bell and you can form an historical/political context for the actions that followed, you will have a greater appreciation for the satirical humor that crowds the entire film. The rest of us were at a disadvantage and felt that we were missing a lot of the clever parody and double entendre. But it was just so entertaining, most of us laughed out loud anyway. No one really knows what happened behind those heavy red curtains (Wikipedia's explanation of each character's role is very helpful) so director/co-writer Armando Iannucci lets the slapstick roll as the farce unfolds while funeral arrangements are made and Stalin's unstable son Vasily and daughter Svetlana are dealt with.

In the background of the opening scene we see and hear bullets flying as figures dart across a narrow opening almost as a parade of horror signifying Stalin's reign of terror when millions disappeared nightly to be executed. The film doesn't want us to laugh at the cruelty but instead, it makes fun of the absurd pettiness, egotistical stupidity, and small-mindedness of the clownish men in power perpetrating that cruelty: a regime run by idiots. And no clumsy Russian accents here. To add another element of absurdity, (and perhaps underscore the universality of the powermongering political shenanigans) the virtuoso cast throw stabbing one liners at each other in their British accents except for Buscemi's (Khrushchev) Brooklynese.

The first scenario sets the tone that eventually brings the story full circle at the end: On Radio Moscow one evening, the pianist Maria Yudina and orchestra perform a Mozart program that impresses Stalin so much, he phones in and asks that a recording be sent over to his dacha. Radio Moscow however, wasn't recording. Panic ensues; only one solution is possible: restage the concert and record it. Maria, who lost a relative to Dear Leader, refuses until she's sufficiently bribed. The conductor leaves in mortal fear that the recreation wouldn't be as good. But somehow the recording is made with a forced captive audience following strict instructions when to loudly applaud. The recording is delivered with a hate note from Maria. While reading the note, Stalin drops dead, setting the absurdist gears in motion. The final film scene shows Khrushchev, now Supreme Leader of the Soviet Union, after removing his co-conspirators, attending a concert given by Maria while future leader Leonid Brezhnev, only a row above, watches him.

Understandably the film was banned in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It's a chapter in history when Russian people feared to say or even think anything that might be considered contrary. What a relief it must be to turn the tables and make fun of those leaders.

A bit absurd, and for a few participants who got hung up trying to understand the historical chain of events, not really that funny, too hard to keep track of who was who. For others, it was wildly entertaining and the only way to tell that story. One discussion reviewer almost gave the film our highest rating (5) but settled on 4.5. High scores were sliced away by lower numbers so in the end, a 3.2 reigned supreme on our scale of 1 to 5.



See you at the movies!

Adriane Dedic, [adedic@pacbell.net](mailto:adedic@pacbell.net)

[www.filmdiscussiongroup.com](http://www.filmdiscussiongroup.com)