



Merry Christmas

The Main Feature

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Director Armando Iannucci
Cinematography Zac Nicholson
Music Christopher Willis
Editor Peter Lambert

Cast

Steve Buscemi	Nikita Khrushchev
Paddy Considine	Comrade Andryev
Rupert Friend	Vasily Stalin
Michael Palin	Vyacheslav Molotov
Andrea Riseborough	Svetlana Stalin
Simon Russell Beale	Lavrentiy Beria
Jeffrey Tambor	Georgy Malenkov
Adrian McLoughlin	Joseph Stalin
Jason Isaacs (<i>"Hello to Jason Isaacs"</i>)	Georgy Zhukov
Paul Whitehouse	Anastas Mikoyan



It's 1953 and the USSR is in the grip of the "Man of Steel". Having fought his way to the top, Joseph Stalin has no intention of loosening his hold on power and makes the most of all the privileges that come with being first among equals. When he hears a concert on the radio, he requests a recording so that he can enjoy it again – and so the scene is set for the first set piece of Armando Iannucci's irreverent, manic satire. Paddy Considine's turn as the radio producer who has to deliver the recording will have you cringing, gasping and laughing as he struggles to control the musicians and the audience to meet Stalin's "request".

This may seem a strange choice for a Christmas film but many of the performances are worthy of (and, for some, the closest they are likely to come to) pantomime. Simon Russell Beale and Jason Isaacs** in particular clearly relished every moment and give Iannucci's script the full-throttle treatment it deserves. The mood ranges from frenetic to chilling, contrasting psychopathic violence with the desire of ordinary citizens just to get on with their lives and avoid being noticed. You will just about have time to catch your breath or recover from hysterics (of one kind or another) before the pace is ramped up again. Tonight, you'll be very glad we have an interval so that you can calm down for a while – just make sure you've finished your refreshments before we resume, we don't want anyone choking on their mince pies.

Armando Iannucci has a strong track record for writing political satire; and after *Veep* and *The Thick of It*, he turned to directing for *In the Loop*. It's hard to believe that he didn't create *The Death of Stalin* but it is in fact adapted from a French graphic novel (more details on page 3).

Speaking to *Rolling Stone*, he explained how he put together a cast that any director would give his eye teeth to work with.

"You know, it's a huge ensemble, and it's like a giant jigsaw puzzle. I like to cast one person at a time rather than go, "Okay, here's my ideal 12. Let's speak to all 12 of them right now." I started off wanting Simon Russell Beale to play [Lavrentiy] Beria. He's a great stage actor in the UK, not that well known in film and television. But then we don't really have an idea of who Beria is, so I like the idea of this sort of unknown presence [playing him].

Whereas Khrushchev is loud, voluble and garrulous. He has to do that transformation from a sort of funny-man clown at the beginning in pyjamas to the can-be-frightening dictator at the end; he needs to be the contrast to Beria. So that's why I thought of Steve, because he has this garrulous, comic ability, but we also know he can be frightening and he can do menacing. I just thought that would make a great sort of contrast.



Then you think, "Okay, who's the ideal person to be caught up in the middle of all this?" You know, the number two who becomes number one but clearly should never be the number one. I thought of Jeffrey Tambor [who plays

Georgy Malenkov] from his time on *The Larry Sanders Show*, the ideal sidekick but someone who should never host the thing. I also wanted to get this range of acting traditions so that they weren't all movie actors. There's Michael Palin, who's known for Monty Python; Jeffrey's more television; Steve is film; Andrea Riseborough is a character actress, a real chameleon; and Simon is a stage performer. I liked that. I didn't want them to be speaking with one voice. I wanted the idea of there being lots of different ways of performing."

What's fascinating is how you're able to kind of find the humour in that without minimizing the horrific reality of it.

"I think the humour comes from the fact that it's true. It's a specific type of humour – a kind of a crazy, mad humour, isn't it? If we just wrote jokes, I think they would feel out of place. So what we did was we just rehearsed the situation, wrote it and then tried to establish what was bizarre about it. Also, the humour is about people's behaviour, that just paranoia of saying the wrong thing and so on.

We found out there were joke books that circulated at the time, about Stalin, about Beria, about torture and the gulags. And people [who] circulated these joke books could be killed if they were found in possession of one, yet they still felt the need to tell jokes about it. "Look, if I can make fun of you, you don't have power over me. You still haven't got me. You haven't got my mind."

Talking to Simon Mayo and Mark Kermode on the BBC's flagship radio film review programme, Iannucci explained how and why the film was made.

We shot this last summer, we shot this pre-Trump and pre-Brexit and pre-all the awfulness, really... It was made in the spirit of 'My God, this happened.' And it's now released in the spirit of 'God help us, please don't let this happen again.', really, which makes it sound quite grim.



MK: It is totally hard to describe because it is on the one hand really funny and on the other hand really horrifying. For people who haven't seen it, do you just want to give us the basics?

AI: It's set around the events between the time Stalin falls over and has a stroke, his death and his funeral; and all over those ten days there is a power struggle going on in the Kremlin as to who takes over. And the power struggle's really between two people: Lavrentiy Beria, played magnificently by Simon Russell Beale, who was the chief torturer for Stalin, the guy who for 20 years had been drawing up the death lists, the names on the lists of people who were taken off to the gulags and never seen again, everyone is afraid that he's going to succeed; and Steve Buscemi as Nikita Khrushchev thinks he's got to be stopped. And it's about that but fundamentally it's about, the comedy from it is the comedy of people being terrified of doing the wrong thing or saying the wrong thing ... everything had to be done unanimously in Stalin's Russia. There is the famous story of when he gave a speech, everyone stands

up and applauds but the first person to stop clapping gets shot so the applause would go on for just hours, you know, technically it could go on for ever under that law.

SM: So it's a little whisper of what we're getting in North Korea, the kind of material that you're filming with. The origin is in a graphic novel.

AI: A French graphic novel by Fabien Nury [author and Thierry Robin, illustrator]. I was approached by Quod the French production company who owned the film rights who said to me "We want to make this into a movie and we'd like you to do it" and I read it and I said "Absolutely". I'd been thinking of doing something about dictatorship anyway, I was thinking more of a fictional, maybe contemporary dictatorship; but there it all was, laid out in black and white, historical events with this level of absurdity to it as well. I said "This is the story I want but I'm doing *Veep*, I'm not ready to do it now." and they said "We'll wait." I knew I was about to do my last season of *Veep* so I said "OK, I'll see you in 18 months." and that was it.



SM: It's not the most obvious subject for a comedy.

AI: No, and the challenge was two things, really: the challenge to make it funny but at the same time for the comedy not to undermine the seriousness of what was going on. Because I knew going in to it that there were going to be

scenes that were funny and there were going to be scenes that definitely weren't funny and it was up to me to make sure that those scenes were as memorable as the comic set pieces.

But for me, the comedy was the way into it. I mean, it opens, again, with a true story: Paddy Considine playing the head of Radio Moscow, the concert going on live, Mozart being broadcast, they get a phone call, "This is Stalin, enjoying the concert, I'd love a recording, I'll send someone round to pick it up." Paddy Considine puts the phone down, turns to the sound engineer and he says "Are we recording this?" and he says "No, it's going out live" and he just panics because he doesn't want to be shot. He orders the doors to be closed, everyone to stay where they are, rounds the audience back in off the streets, at which point the conductor faints out of sheer terror, knocks himself unconscious and they have to scour the streets of Moscow for another conductor who comes in and does it in his pyjamas and that's all true. Well, except in reality, the first conductor they got in was drunk, so they had to get actually a third conductor in but I took that out because it was too silly.

MK: When the real thing is too absurd, you have to rein it back in.

AI: Yeah, we airbrushed one of the conductors out of history.

Historical note:

Beria was one of the foremost members of the Politburo in the months after Stalin's death but Molotov and Khrushchev combined to have him arrested and put on trial, accused, among other things, of being a spy for the West. After this short period in agreement, Khrushchev and Molotov fell out, mainly over foreign policy. In 1956, Khrushchev delivered a stinging denunciation of Stalin and the cult of personality, which caused division among the major communist nations. Some eastern European countries took it as a cue to bid for freedom from Soviet influence (Poland, Hungary) but the attempts to revolt were crushed. The Cold War was under way.

Gill McGlashan



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Comments and reactions to: **The Violin Teacher**

Score **0** **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6** **7** **8** **9** **10**
 ~ ~ ~ 1 ~ 2 7 18 10 4 2

No of reaction slips received = 44

Average Score = 7.2

Worth a look, good lead. Big bucks production but somehow disjointed

The "teacher" = good on acting, v poor conductor

A bit predictable, but very well acted and directed. Loved the music

A worthy film, but rather slow and the ending predictable

Enjoyed the film until its abrupt and unsatisfactory ending

Sad but uplifting particularly in such violent circumstances

In spite of the background it was a very inspiring film

Strong central character, and an insight into favela life

Very interesting way to look at how people live in slums

Potentially cliched plot but uplifted by the Brazil setting

A simple film against an authentic background - very enjoyable

Excellent cinematography, fast moving and gritty but full of hope

I understood!!

Thoroughly enjoyed it

Formulaic but enjoyable

A bit slow and predictable

Strong message realistically portrayed

Excellent - sad story with a touch of hope

Powerful film - well acted - great music

Very well told story and excellent music

Music is balm for the soul

Music can work wonders

Wonderful inspirational movie

Position	Film	Average Score
1 st	Darkest Hour	8.08
2 nd	Guildford in the Great War	7.56
3 rd	The Violin Teacher	7.2
4 th	L'homme du train	6.71
5 th	Bar Bahar (In Between)	6.26
6 th	The Levelling	5.6
7 th	Phantom Thread	5.16

Next on 10 January:



“Frances McDormand is superb in this hard-hitting crime drama that grabs you and doesn't let you go. Brilliant.”

“There's debate, drama, a lot of humour as well as harshness, and original characters that take the story to unexpected places that are not plot twists but seem to arise naturally out of their own complex life.”

“With a roster of memorable characters, a cast on universally great form and a script that is frequently capable of wrong-footing its audience”

“Shocking, provocative and laugh-out-loud funny.”