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'Death of Stalin' almost a Soviet spin on 'Veep'

Minutes before a live-broadcast Mozart concerto is about to end, the Radio Moscow station manager receives a telephone call from the office of Supreme Commander Josef Stalin. The premier loved the performance, says the voice on the other end of the line, and requests that a recording of the concert be sent to him immediately.

There's a problem. The concert wasn't recorded.

Now the station must scramble to round up the exiting orchestra musicians, convince the lovely piano soloist to replay her recital, and find a new conductor (the original conductor having fainted, conked his head, and rendered himself unconscious) who won't even be given time to change out of his pajamas.

The spirited pianist slips a note of defiant protest into the sleeve of the recorded disc sent to the leader's dacha.

Stalin enjoys the record, rings up the station master to accuse him of betraying the people by delivering it so late, reads the pianist's missive, and has a massive stroke on the spot.

This scene of Stalin's March 1953 death is the prologue of "The Death of Stalin," a "comedy of terrors" covering the chaotic fight for power that followed this inciting incident.

Incredibly, the film's underlying story is true. There is conflation of events, of course, and exaggeration to serve the storyline. For example, according to Irwin Weil, Professor Emeritus of Slavic Languages and Literature at Northwestern, Stalin's stroke occurred weeks after reading the pianist's actual note,

which was not as strongly worded as in the movie.

There was a late-night orchestra round-up; Stalin did lay dying on the floor for hours because his guards were too fearful to enter his room after hearing him fall; and the Politburo members deliberated at length whether to call a doctor as Stalin expired, fearing the consequences of calling the "wrong" doctor.

Writer and director Armando Iannucci didn't ask the American and British cast to assume fake Russian accents. (The members of the Politburo were from different Soviet states and spoke in a variety of regional accents anyway.) He believes pseudo-Russian accents would cause the movie to seem like a place too far away, "not here and not now," and lose its immediacy.

The point of "The Death of Stalin" is about the present.

By casting well-known character actors in the roles of key politburo comrades, Iannucci translates the Russians' personalities for modern audiences with a kind of shorthand. The flaccid pompousness of Stalin's immediate successor, Georgy Malenkov (Jeffrey Tambor), the rigid hardliner-ism of Vyacheslav Molotov (Michael Palin) and the clownish

goofiness of Nikita Khrushchev (Steve Buscemi) are telegraphed by the comedic essences of the actors who portray them.

The cadaverous Buscemi doesn't look like the bearish Khrushchev we remember from newsreels, but Buscemi is easily



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believable as a cajoling, conniving character that even shows glimpses of compassion on his way to the Soviet Premiership. We know that Malenkov must be a vain, weak, narcissist. Why else would Jeffrey Tambor be cast in this role?

And the same Monty Python immovability that Michael Palin famously displayed in defending the vitality of an expired parrot is evident in the demeanor of unwavering party hardliner Molotov, who assented to his own wife's imprisonment and torture.

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As Lavrenti Beria, the head of Stalin's secret police, acclaimed Shakespearian actor Simon Russell Beale stands apart.

Beria, an unfamiliar name to most Americans, spent years orchestrating torture and terror operations. A sadist in service to

Stalin, Beria was keeper and creator of Stalin's lists of those to be tortured, exiled or sent to the gulags. He was a genius at mass execution, ghastly humiliation and perverse sexual exploitation.

Iannucci says he began mulling a movie idea about a fictional contemporary dictator after ending his four-year run as the creator of the Emmy Award-winning HBO series "Veep."

While pondering this prospect, he was given a copy of Fabien Nury and Thierry Robin's French graphic novel "The Death of Stalin" (soon to be published in English by Titan comics). No need to look further. Everything he wanted was right there, documented in noir-toned, comic book chiaroscuro.

Both "The Death of Stalin" and "Veep" share the same absurdist sensibility.

The movie is a lavishly recreated, historically detailed, Soviet-era version of the HBO series: High ranking government officials, claw, climb and politically assassinate each other in their grasp for power.

Except the Soviet firing squads aren't just circular, they're real.

"The Death of Stalin" has no payoff. There are no heroes or thrilling escapes. We know the ending, which continues to be written in the present. It is a protest film, conceived as the current European neo-nationalist and American populist waves began to swell, delivered at a timely transitional moment.

Iannucci says he made this movie to remind those who are currently chafed by democracy's frustrations of just how fragile it can be — and what the alternative to democracy looks like.