

Film review of *Firemen's Ball* by Oris Aigbokhaevbolo

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Milos Forman is one of the most rewarded directors in Academy Award history- two of his films having won a combined 14 Oscars at the world's most prestigious film award ceremony. Yet, outside film schools and discussions between cinema buffs, it is unlikely the name is met with more than a faint recognition, which makes the decision to screen his last film before emigrating to the United States a wise one.

Years before the filmmaker directed Hollywood great, Jack Nicholson, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (adapted from the Ken Kesey novel,) which gave the actor his first of three Oscars, he directed this oddball comedy acknowledged as one of the best films from the Czech New Wave, a film movement with a short span but lasting legacy. *Firemen's Ball* is the story of a fire department's preparation for an event to honour the cancer stricken ex-president and a beauty pageant. Despite good intentions, the event crumbles under the weight of its own bureaucracy and general ineptitude of the organisers: gifts are stolen by the guests; when young women coerced for the pageant abscond, an unattractive older woman is crowned; an officer of the department gets a heart attack when lights, switched off to encourage guests return their loot, abruptly comes back on and he is caught returning an item; a fire breaks out and the department it turns out to be as ineffectual at putting out fires as it is at organising a ball.

Immensely popular upon release, its peculiar manner of mocking officialdom led the Communist regime in place at the time to ban the film the year after it was released. Today, it may be puzzling a government banned such a hearty comedy. upon reflection, however, it is not strange: absolutist regimes of inflexible configurations cannot allow its power structures laughed at: laughter can be dissent.

Director Milos Forman denied any suggestion he made the film to satirise the workings and effectiveness of the Communist government's bureaucracies, saying he knew, "...if I be real, if I'll be true, the film will reveal an allegorical sense."

The world is full of artists who deny a deeper reading of their work. However, if it be true, we can only be grateful, for in this case the product functions both as a regular offbeat comedy as well as a criticism of its time; a time replete with corruption, needless structures, official ineptitude and above all, human stupidity. Nonetheless, none of these is peculiar to the 60's or to Czechoslovakia – every Nigerian has witnessed or experienced slight variations of the events of *Firemen's Ball* at least thrice in his/her lifetime.

Makes you wonder: who'd have thought the closest thing to a film on the socio-political milieu in contemporary Nigeria was made by a Czech director, in 1967? Not you? Me neither.

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