

The Main Feature



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Departures (おくりびと)

Japan 2008
130 mins Cert 12A

Director Yojiro Takita
Writer Kundô Koyama
Music Joe Hisaishi

Cast
Masahiro Motoki
(Daigo Kobayashi)
Ryoko Hirose (Mika
Kobayashi)
Tutomu Yamazaki
(Ikuei Sasaki)
Kimiko Yo (Kamimura
Yuriko)
Takashi Sasano
(Shokichi Hirata)
Kazuko Yoshiyuki
(Tsuyako Yamashita)
Tetta Sugimoto
(Yamashita).



The brainchild of its leading actor, onetime boy-band member Masahiro Motoki, *Departures* turns out to be a delightful surprise, at once an engaging “dramedy” and an eloquent social statement. Motoki recalled “I received the idea for this project from the producer. I know of the job of a “nokanshi” (encoffiner) through reading *Coffinman: The Journal of a Buddhist Mortician* but as I have never actually been in direct contact with them, there was too little I knew of the job.”

Q: *Departures* depicts a process called encoffining, in which the main character of the film washes and prepares the corpse for the coffin, in a ritual performed before the family. Is this a common practice?

Motoki: “No, most Japanese learned about the practice through this film. It's a dying ritual that persists in a



few areas. It's hardly common. It does linger. You can order it as part of a funeral service. But it's hardly common or typical.”

Takita: “It used to be a community ritual that was done out of love and respect, as opposed to a business. Washing and purifying the dead is now professionalized. It has become popularized because the film was a monster hit.”

For centuries, dealing with dead bodies and dead animals was regarded as unclean in Japan, much as it was in India, and though the caste system

that limited opportunities for the *burakumin* has long been a thing of the past, that prejudice dies hard. Those who prepare bodies are still widely discriminated against, and that discrimination can extend to families. Director Yojiro Takita and writer Kundo Koyama insist that it's not the act of dying itself that their homeland demonizes, but the archetypal uncleanliness of corpses, which monumentally violate the sanitary demands of Shinto.

Motoki: "It was only established as a profession in the 1960s. It's making a comeback. Young people are starting to consider it as a legitimate profession. What's most important about the technique is the overall approach. It's not about putting yourself in the spotlight. You're performing a ritual on the corpse on behalf of the family. You create an atmosphere on behalf of the family. It's hard to master."

Did you do any particular research into encoffinment or the industry of encoffinment?

Takita: We did a lot of research on the encoffiners. I had read about encoffiners previously, but had never seen it prior to working on the film. So both myself and the lead actor, Motoki, went to visit professional encoffiners at work. We witnessed them and also trained under them as assistants so that we had hands-on experience.

When you were first learning the process, what was your first reaction to it?

Takita: When I first had hands-on experience working with the bodies, with the encoffinment process, I was first impressed with how still everything felt in the space. There's a certain quiet stillness to the entire atmosphere within which the encoffiner has to work. Every little sound felt very fresh. I was struck by how sacred and how beautiful the entire process felt. The dead body wasn't something to fear. I found it to be very beautiful. And of course, you need to touch and wash the body and you do that with a lot of tenderness. More than anything else, I was struck by the almost-magical process by which the encoffiners have to return the body, especially the face, to the moment when the departed person was shining the brightest in their lives, the most beautiful. It was very impressive.

The ritual itself seems very quiet and still. What was the challenge of filming it?

Takita: The biggest challenge was how to portray this in a way that was the most cinematic, to capture the light. My goal was to make the audience feel like they're sitting on the floor with the bereaved family.

The comic side was perfect. As a director, what were some of your challenges in striking that perfect balance of comedy?

Takita: I think the balance between comedy and the more serious drama in the film was a very difficult challenge. I was careful not to use any excessive humor or excessive drama. I'm not interested in manipulating the audience to laugh or cry. Rather I think often you find humor and comedy simply in characters that are doing something very seriously. When somebody delves into a certain task with all the seriousness in the world, the humor, or the absurdity, sometimes comes out on its own. So I didn't want to force the issue. I was also careful to make sure the audience is able to emotionally identify with the protagonist as early as possible, because you're not going to find something funny unless you are in that situation and know it could happen to anyone. So oftentimes you're laughing not at him, but with him as he experiences the different things in his journey.



The lead actor recalled his attempts at learning to play the cello: "The right and the left hand move in different ways and that drove me out of my mind. I spent two months practicing. Ultimately, I was able to polish my skills so that it worked fine. I even bought my own cello. It's now a bit of a hobby. The cello is the instrument that most resembles the human voice."

So heavily favoured for the Oscars were the Israeli and French entries, "Waltz With Bashir" and "The Class," that Mr. Takita and his leading man, Masahiro Motoki, had to convince each other that they had, in fact, just heard their movie announced as the winner.

What did it mean when the film won the Oscar?

Takita: "I was thrilled for the movie to be nominated for an Oscar, let alone to win. I thought about movies in terms of the Japanese audience. To receive the Oscar boosted my confidence. It's given me courage and inspiration for future moviemaking."

Motoki: "In Japan, the fact that this won the Academy Award created a frenzy. We get so much bad news and this was like a beautiful precious flower that bloomed. There are individual actors and directors taking more global steps. But for a whole Japanese film to win an award was a real shot in the arm."

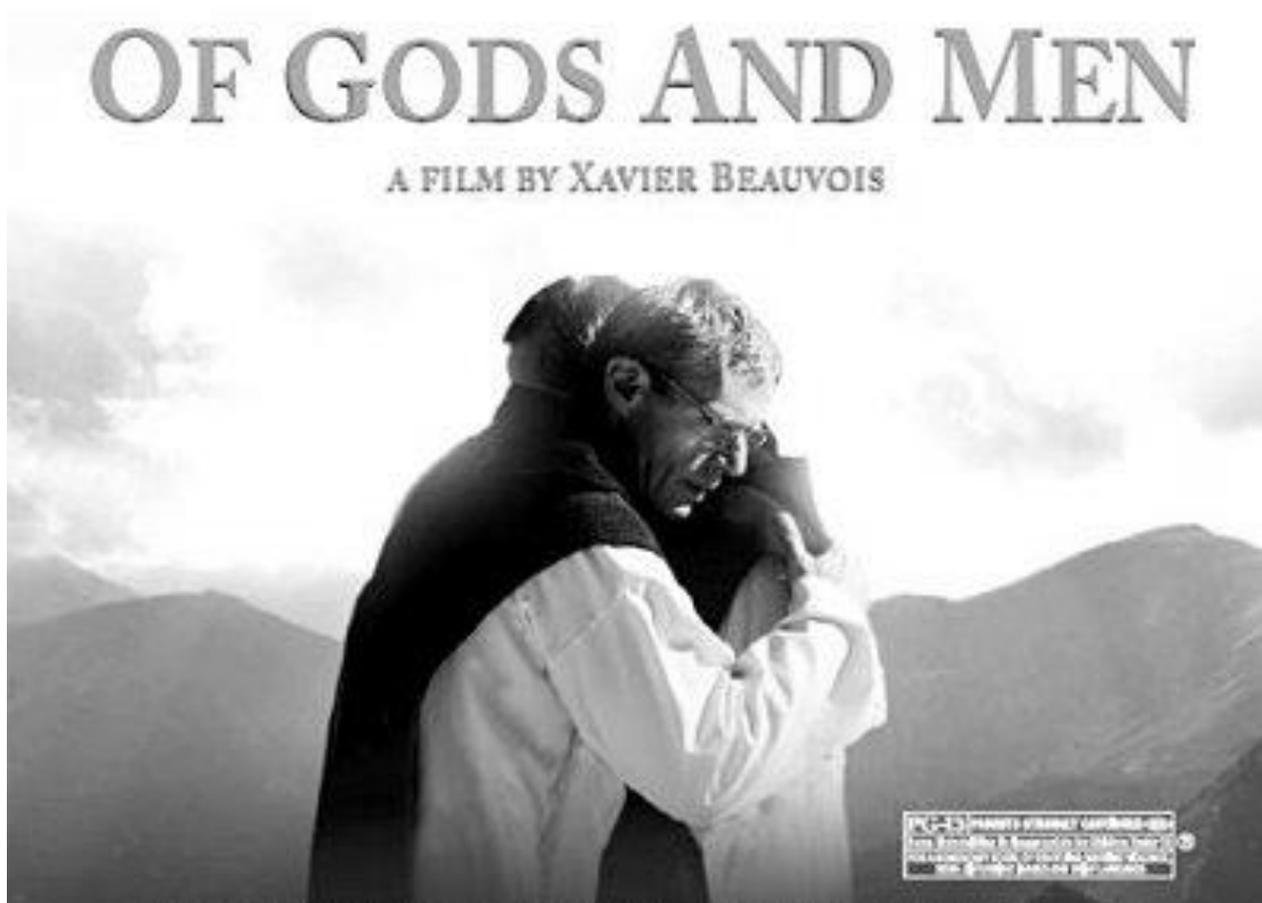
His training with an encoffineer included helping out during an actual ceremony, in which they prepared the body of a grandmother. "It was in February, and it was cold enough outside, but when I touched the cold corpse, I sort of was imbued with a sense of mission," he said, "to try to use as much human warmth as I could to restore this grandmother to a lifelike presence for presentation to her family."

"Departures" is a well crafted film that does not shy away from being sentimental while dealing with a sensitive topic. Yet, it eloquently transforms the meaning of death into a celebration of love among the living.

Iain McGlashan

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