



# DEPARTURES

Spring  
Season  
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## Review by Amber Wilkinson, Eye For Film:

Death is a funny thing - both peculiar and ha-ha. Director Yojiro Takita and writer Kundo Kayama know this and aren't afraid to give you an emotional punch as well as a punchline. Takita approaches his film as a careful orchestration, blending sweet with sour to produce an unexpected and subtle symphony of moods that was a surprise, but worthy winner of the foreign language Oscar this year.

This idea of an orchestral touchstone is placed in the mind of the viewer from the start, thanks to the central character, Daigo - a cello player, who has reached a career crossroads. When his orchestra unexpectedly folds, he decides that he has gone as far as he can with his music. So, with the encouragement of wife Mika (Ryoko Hirose, imbuing her supporting role with enviable quirkiness), the pair leave Tokyo to return to the house Daigo inherited from his mother in his small-town home. Looking for a job, he spots what appears to be the perfect employment but, finds that the job description which involves "working with departures" is not the travel agent's position he had hoped.

Instead, it refers to the sort of departure from which there is no return - namely death. More specifically, his new boss (Tutomu Yamazaki, stealing every scene he is in), is an encoffineer. This means he acts as a sort of conduit between death and the funeral, ritually preparing the body for cremation, ceremonially washing, dressing and applying make-up to the deceased in front of the family. Teething troubles - unexpectedly hilarious and touching in equal measure - aside, Daigo finds he has a flair for the job... the only problem being that, in Japan, there is a stigma attached to dealing with the dead and he daren't tell Mika the truth.

This description barely scratches the surface of the complex and character-driven plot, which also sees Daigo confronting unfinished emotional business with his absent father, while finding time to contemplate more universal concerns of mortality, the fundamental importance of grief and of coming to terms with who you are and what your expectations of life can be.

Like a finely worked piece of music, these themes are given space to find their own voice before coming together in a harmonious crescendo that brings with it emotional weight. A tune, however, is only as good as its orchestra, and here the acting is superb, particularly from Yamazaki and Masahiro Motoki, who brings measured comedy and subtle sadness to the role of Daigo without slipping into caricature. Music itself plays a key role, throughout, with Joe Hisaishi's soulful scoring matching the film's lyricism note for note.

Although profound and, for that matter, profoundly moving in places, there is a playfulness to Takita's direction and Koyama finds plenty of deadpan humour in dealing with the dead. Never is this careful arrangement of romance, humour and desolation more evident than in a remarkable montage around two-thirds of the way through the film which manages to generate both laughter and tears within a short space.

Mixing humour and sadness, thoughtfulness and levity within a single film is a tricky manoeuvre. Get the mix wrong and the comedy can sit like a unpalatable slick on the surface of more meaningful issues or, conversely, attempts at careful consideration can slip into mawkishness or, worse still, become laughable. Get the alchemy right, however, and this sort of tender and engaging cinema is the result.

## From a review by Maggie Lee, The Hollywood Reporter:

An out-of-work cellist finds a new lease of life as an 'encoffineer' when he develops professional pride and respect for the dead in the heart-warming and humorous "Departures." Yojiro Takita, who directed enduring commercial hits like "The Ying Yang Master" and "The Yen Family," has made a popular gem -- thematically respectable, technically hard to fault, artfully scripted to entertain and touch.

*Departures* invokes the quintessentially Japanese "artisan's soul" -- a work ethic of utmost devotion to any profession. The attentive and ceremonious manner in which makeovers is performed before bodies are placed in their coffins is eye-opening. The film gently satirizes modern society's denial of the physical aspect of death through Daigo's initial shame and squeamishness about his job, and the social disdain he experiences. The scene of him wolfing down fried chicken suggests his appetite for life is eventually whetted by confronting mortality daily -- a reconnection with nature's cycle.

The film can be taxed with being a little too long and too sentimental. Joe Hisaishi's score is unabashedly romantic and the cinematography is ravishing, but there are few moments of inner contemplation. Even when Daigo is alone playing the cello, the scenes are heavily embellished with swooping shots, a heavenly countryside backdrop and rhapsodic strings.

This is compensated for by some skilful comic relief and warm rapport among the cast, especially the filial relationship Daigo develops for Sasaki who stands-in for his absent father. Motoki's performance is rich with nuance, but Yamazaki takes expressiveness to a new level, remaining unperturbed, inscrutable and affectionately condescending at all times.



## A.O.Scott, New York Times:

It would be unfair to hold a grudge against Yojiro Takita's *Departures* just because it won the Academy Award this year for best foreign-language film. Admirers of *Waltz With Bashir* and *The Class*, two exceptionally strong runners-up in that category, should not take their disappointment out on Mr. Takita's entry, which doesn't require comparison with those two formally innovative, thematically daring films. It is perfectly mediocre all on its own.