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# CAST

**Masahiro MOTOKI** as Daigo KOBAYASHI

**Tsutomu YAMAZAKI** as Shôei SASAKI

**Ryôko HIROSUE** as Mika KOBAYASHI

**Kimiko YO** as Yuriko UEMURA

**Takashi SASANO** as Shokichi HIRATA

**Kazuko YOSHIYUKI** as Tsuyako YAMASHITA

# CREW

Director **Yôjirô TAKITA**

Screenplay **Kundô KOYAMA**

Executive Producer **Yasuhiro MASE**

Producers **Toshiaki NAKAZAWA, Toshihisa WATAI**

Music **Joe HISAISHI**

Director of Photography **Takeshi HAMADA**

Lighting **Hitoshi TAKAYA**

Production Design **Fumio OGAWA**

Editing **Akimasa KAWASHIMA**







# DIGNITY IN DEATH: YOJIRO TAKITA'S *DEPARTURES*

by Jasper Sharp

It wouldn't be unfair to those in any way connected with the production of *Departures* to say that when it won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2009, beating off such strong competition as Uli Edel's *The Baader Meinhof Complex*, Laurent Cantet's *The Class* and Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*, it came as something of a surprise.

This was, after all, the first ever Japanese live-action film to receive such an accolade (although just a few years previously, in 2003, Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*, 2001) had romped home with the Oscar for Best Animated Feature). Japanese cinema had certainly been popular with the Academy before the Best Foreign Language Film category was introduced in 1956, with Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (*Rashōmon*, 1950), Teinosuke Kinugasa's *Gate of Hell* (*Jigokumon*, 1953) and Hiroshi Inagaki's *Samurai, The Legend of Musashi* (*Miyamoto Musashi*, 1954) all receiving Honorary Awards (in 1952, 1954 and 1955 respectively) as the best foreign-language pictures released in the United States. (Sanzō Wada's contribution to *Gate of Hell* was also garlanded with an Academy Award for Best Costume Design in a Colour film.) Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985), as an independent co-production between France and Japan, was infamously not submitted in the category after its producer Serge Silberman discovered the Japanese Academy had put forward another film, *Gray Sunset* (*Hanaichimonme*), a drama about a university professor diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease directed by Shunya Itō (of *Female Prisoner Scorpion* fame) that didn't even make the Oscar nominee shortlist. *Ran* received nominations in a number of other categories, including Best Director for Kurosawa, but only won the Best Costume Design award for Emi Wada. Meanwhile, the list of Best Foreign Language Film nominations from Japan over the years has included such classics as Kon Ichikawa's *The Burmese Harp* (*Biruma no tategoto*, 1956), Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Woman of the Dunes* (*Suna no onna*, 1964), Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1964), Kei Kumai's *Sandakan No. 8* (*Sandakan hachiban shōkan: Bōkyō*, 1974), Kurosawa's *Dodesukaden* (1970) and *Kagemusha* (1980), and Kōhei Oguri's *Muddy River* (*Doro no kawa*, 1981). Throughout much of the 80s and 90s, however, and up until the nomination for Yōji Yamada's *The Twilight Samurai* (*Tasogare Seibei*, 2002), the Academy's interest in Japanese cinema was negligible.



*Departures* was not only a departure of sorts from the usual Oscar-winning fare, but also from the kind of Japanese film released in the West. For a start, while its director Yōjirō Takita had enjoyed a successful commercial career in his home country spanning almost three decades, his name was, and still remains, a relatively unfamiliar one compared with those transnational auteurs represented on the arthouse side by figures such as Hirokazu Kore'eda and Naomi Kawase, and on the cult side by Takashi Miike and Shion Sono. There have been no international retrospectives or in-depth studies of his work, although surprisingly, a significant amount of it has actually been seen overseas.

Born in 1955, like many of his generation, Takita began his filmmaking career in the field of the erotic pink film (*pinku eiga*), adding a slapstick comic twist to the usual nudie formula in his decidedly non-politically-correct entries in the *Molester Train* series, released between 1982 and 1985. His first mainstream work, *No More Comics* (*Komikku zasshi nanka iranai!*, 1986) – a riotous and acerbic take on Japanese celebrity culture featuring an early role for Takeshi Kitano and centred around a jaded paparazzi for a TV gossip show – received a North American release under the title of *Comic Magazine*. *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby described it as “a scurrilously funny picture of a technologically advanced society with an insatiable appetite for what’s largely irrelevant.”<sup>1</sup>

Across the following decade, Takita continued with a run of mordant satires on his bubble-era homeland that remain little seen in the West. *The Yen Family* (*Kimura-ke no hitobito*, 1988) presented a critique of the shallow materialism of the time in its portrait of a household where all the family interactions are purely financial, with the parents paying one other for sex and charging their kids for board and lodging. *We Are Not Alone* (*Bokura wa minna ikiteiru*, 1993) and *The Tropical People* (*Nettai rakuen kurabu*, 1994) played with Japan’s fear and prejudice towards its neighbours on the Asian mainland, with the former dwelling on the antics of a group of salarymen on a business trip to a fictitious developing country somewhere in Southeast Asia and the latter about a travel agent posted outside her comfort zone to Bangkok. *The Exam* (*Ojuken*, 1999) parodied Japan’s fiercely competitive education system, in its tale of a six-year-old girl driven to her limits by her pushy parents’ attempts to prepare her for the entrance exam to an exclusive school.

Takita’s higher-budgeted yet less distinctive later films enjoyed a much wider overseas reach. *The Yin Yang Master* (*Onmyōji*, 2001) and its 2003 sequel, based on the popular series of novels of the same by Baku Yumemakura, followed the adventures of the Heian-era court astrologer-cum-detective Abe no Seimei as he investigated a series of mysterious happenings within the aristocratic circles of 10<sup>th</sup>-century Japan. *When the Last Sword Is Drawn* (*Mibugishiden*, 2003) was a period drama set within the ranks of the self-appointed

Shinsengumi law-enforcing militia loyal to the Tokugawa shogunate that appeared in Kyoto during the 1860s, while *Ashura* (*Ashura-jō no hitomi*, 2005) was a supernatural period fantasy which pitted a devil-slaying Kabuki actor against the titular demon queen.

In comparison to such films, *Departures*’ tale of a professional cellist, forced to abandon his dreams with the bankruptcy of his orchestra and move back to his hometown to take up a new profession as an assistant undertaker, combines its high-concept narrative with an altogether more subdued approach. The story offered a sense of perspective and affirmation with a universal appeal in the atmosphere of uncertainty in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, despite the distinctive cultural odour to its painstaking depictions of the last rites surrounding the send-off of the recently deceased.

Takita was introduced to the film’s source material by the actor Masahiro Motoki. *Coffinman: The Journal of a Buddhist Mortician* (*Nōkanfu nikki*), an autobiographical collection of essays about its author Shinmon Aoki’s experiences working as a mortician in the 1970s, was a huge hit upon its publication in 1993. It appeared in an English translation in 2004, and by 2006 had undergone no less than 25 reprintings in Japan. Nevertheless, Kundō Koyama’s script so drastically downplayed the more overt religious and philosophical aspects of Aoki’s memoirs that he refused to allow the filmmakers to use the title.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this was fortuitous, as *Departures*’ original Japanese title, *Okuribito* (literally “he who sends off”) is central to the film’s main dramatic embellishment, with Motoki’s character Daigo drawn into this clandestine profession after responding to a vaguely-worded job advert in the local newspaper, which he believes to be for a travel agency. He is unaware that the initials of the NK Agency that placed the ad stand for *nōkan*, or casketing, and that the one-line job description, “assisting departures” (*tabi no otetsudai*), contains a misprint, with the character *tabi*, which explicit referring to a trip or a physical journey, printed instead of *tabidachi*, linked to the Buddhist idea of *yasurakana tabidachi*, or “peaceful departure” to the afterlife.<sup>3</sup>

The film, however, largely plays lip service to its Buddhist underpinnings, although Takita imbues the drama with such motifs as the purifying role of water and the cyclical flows of life: salmon swim upstream to die at the place where they spawned; a cremation scene segues into a shot of a flock of swan dispersing into the skies; while Daigo’s wife Mika’s pregnancy coincides with the death of his estranged father. He also leavens the potentially morbid subject matter with a bawdy comic touch reminiscent of his early cycle of films.

2 – Ama, Michihiro. “Transcending Death in *Departures* (*Okuribito*): A Case Study of Film, Literature and Buddhism in Modern Japan.” *Journal of Japanese & Korean Cinema* vol. 2, no. 1 (2010): 35–50.

3 – Okuyama, Yoshiko. “Motifs of Buddhism and Folklore in *Dororo* (2007) and *Departures* (2008).” In *Japanese Mythology in Film: A Semiotic Approach to Reading Japanese Film and Anime* (Lexington Books, 2015): 129–166.

1 – Canby, Vincent. “*Comic Magazine*.” *The New York Times*, 16 January 1987.





*Departures* opens with Daigo's discovery that the young woman serving as his first subject is not all she appears, while Mika learns the true nature of her husband's mysterious new job after witnessing him serving in the ignominious role of a corpse in an industry training video, just at the point where his boss Sasaki (played by Tsutomu Yamazaki) details how to insert a cotton swab up the anus to prevent seepage.

Such additions dismayed Aoki, who later wrote that the film "does not direct the audience to the same point I want to make in my book", which was not only his own spiritual journey through his work (an aspect that is conveyed to an extent in Motoki's performance), but also the prejudice he encountered in his profession.<sup>4</sup> Daigo's initial revulsion at his role, not to mention his wife's reaction when she discovers it, stems from the deeply-engrained taboo in Japan about coming into contact with dead bodies. His attempts to keep his work secret are doomed to failure in his new small-town environment, as highlighted when a group of schoolgirls catches a whiff of him as he rides home on the bus returning from an early assignment. Japanese audiences would certainly pick up on the fact, although it is never explicitly addressed within the film, that the character of the head mortician Sasaki and possibly others such as Tsuyako (Kazuko Yoshiyuki), the older woman who runs the local bathhouse, are members of the stigmatised *buraku* class. This outcast community, which has faced much prejudice historically due to its members' involvement in professions that involve handling the dead, such as butchery and leather tanning, is one to which Daigo comes as an outsider.

But certainly it would be setting up a straw man in criticising *Departures* for what it isn't rather than what it is, a beautifully crafted commercial film featuring some wonderful performances. One welcome element is the return to the screen of Masahiro Motoki in the lead role. The model-turned-actor was a regular presence in Japanese cinema throughout the 1990s, at least as far as Western viewers were concerned, with appearances in Masayuki Suō's exuberant comedies, *Fancy Dance* (1989), as a famous pop singer who retreats to the ascetic life of a Buddhist monastery to hide out from his fans for a year; *Sumo Do, Sumo Don't* (*Shiko funjatta*, 1992), as a flunking student who enters his college's sumo club to redeem his bad grades; and in a smaller part playing Naoto Takenaka's rumba-rumpling nemesis in the ballroom comedy *Shall We Dance?* (*Sharu wi dansu?*, 1996). He also played alongside Takenaka as one of the five men assembled to take on the yakuza in Takashi Ishii's stylish crime thriller *Gonin* (1995), and as Detective Akechi, the dashing fictional alter-ego of the legendary *ero guro* author Edogawa Ranpo in Kazuyoshi Okuyama's energetic but scattershot biopic *The Mystery of Ranpo* (*Ranpo*, 1995). He starred in Takashi Miike's poetic road movie *The Bird People in China* (*Chūgoku no chōjin*, 1998), as the disoriented salaryman adrift in the hinterlands of Yunnan Province with the

4 - Ibid., p. 148.

crabby gangster sent by his mob to trail him, and as the provincial physician haunted by his deadly doppelgänger in Shinya Tsukamoto's adaption of a Ranpo short story, *Gemini* (*Sōseiji*, 1999).

Motoki has been rather less prevalent in the new millennium, with his larger roles in Masahiro Shinoda's *Spy Sorge* (2003), about the Soviet spy Richard Sorge's activities in Japan before the war, or as the legendary swordsman Musashi Miyamoto in Chiba Seiji's *Ganryujima* (2003), making little impression overseas. Subsequent to the success of *Departures*, he has returned in a number of prominent appearances, none less so than as the Emperor Hirohito in Masato Harada's *The Emperor in August* (*Nihon no ichiban nagai hi*, 2015).

*Departures* had already enjoyed a degree of international recognition prior to its opening in Japan on 13 September 2008, winning the Grand Prix at that year's Montreal World Film Festival held the preceding month. By the end of the year, it had grossed just over 3 billion Yen domestically, the equivalent of over \$30 million, placing it at the number eleven position among the year's top box-office rankings. The critics of Japan's premier film journal *Kinema Junpo* voted it the best of the year, and the film went on to win in no less than nine of the categories, including Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay and prizes for both its lead actor Masahiro Motoki and several of the supporting staff, at the 32nd Japan Academy Awards held in February 2009, a prerequisite for the country's Academy Awards submission.

Its subsequent Oscar recognition (before its North American opening on 29 May 2009) saw *Departures* more than doubling its domestic takings to approximately 6.5 billion Yen (almost \$70 million), making it the third highest earning Japanese film released in 2008, just behind Hayao Miyazaki's animation *Ponyo* (*Gake no Ue no Ponyo*) and the final theatrical instalment of the manga and TV tie-in *Boys Over Flowers* (*Hana yori dango*, Yasuharu Ishii). It also out-grossed the year's highest-earning Hollywood release in Japan, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. It is to the credit of everyone involved that such a taboo subject matter could ever achieve such a degree of crossover success, both at home and abroad.

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# MASAHIRO MOTOKI INTERVIEW

*This interview was conducted as part of the film's original US press tour, in Los Angeles, 23rd February, 2009*

**It has been said that you were the one who came up with the original idea of the film, *Departures*. Was there any event that inspired you?**

When I went to India about 15 years ago, I was totally moved to see that life and death co-exist in harmony and in a very natural way. They are both regarded as equally valuable in human life. Next to the people who are washing and grooming themselves in the river, there were people having a funeral and sending the dead bodies off. Death and life co-exists in balance there. I was fascinated and moved by the sight of these incidents. When I returned back to Tokyo, I felt that death was intentionally hidden away from the everyday life. People are just too busy running around and don't face or look at death as an important part of our lives. This also means that in other words, we don't appreciate and enjoy life as much as we should. Since my trip to India, I have always been thinking about the meaning of life and death which lie side by side.

When my child was born, I was there with my wife. Seeing my own child being born, I realised how close life and death are. I was so happy to see my child born and I couldn't be a happier man. But then at the same time I realised death carries the same importance as birth.

**Were you acquainted with the job of a *nōkanshi* (encoffiner, the person who works on the ceremonial preparations of the dead bodies before placing them in the coffin) from before?**

The first time I took a deep interest in *nōkanshi* was when I read a book called *Coffinman: The Journal of a Buddhist Mortician* by Shinmon Aoki. I was deeply moved by the book. As I had started to take interest in the way of life and death, I was totally fascinated by the book and the job of encoffinement. I started to think about a movie based on the book from the first time I read it.

**Did you actually learn the encoffinement ceremony from someone, or attend a real ceremony?**

As you can imagine, when I was offered to play the character in *Departures*, I had to learn to be an encoffiner. I accompanied a professional and learned how one carries out the ritual. I tried to capture the elegance and the beauty that the ceremony conveyed as much as possible.

I even secretly attended an actual ceremony, where a professional encoffiner was performing the ritual in front of a grieving family. As I looked and observed, it became more and more clear that the ritual of encoffinement was extremely artistic, just like the tea ceremony. It is peaceful and required polished skilfulness. I was amazed that the ritual was done in complete silence. It definitely reminded me of the tea ceremony.

**How do you choose the characters that you play, and how do you put yourself into these characters?**

Creating a character is always an uphill struggle. It is never easy. During shooting I always suffer a great deal. It doesn't come easily. But because I go through so much pain and struggle, when I find joy and peace in between, I can appreciate that much more. However, I am not serious all the time. There is definitely a very punk side to me as well. I would like to show that part of myself in another film someday.

**Do you think this was your best performance ever?**

When I am asked if I think my performance in this movie is my best so far, I don't know how to answer. When he was asked what his favourite film is so far, Charlie Chaplin always used to say "the next film". I want to feel the same way, as I would like to think that my best work is still yet to come. During the shooting, I never thought that this movie would become a big success or would achieve as much as it has achieved (including the Oscars). I believe it is up to the audience to decide whether or not a film is great, and all that I can focus on is giving my best during the shooting.









# ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*Departures* is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1. The film was prepared in High Definition by Shochiku Co. Ltd and provided to Arrow Films.

# PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Nora Mehenni, Francesco Simeoni**  
Executive Producer **Kevin Lambert**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
Production Manager **Jonathan Meunier**  
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**  
Blu-ray and DVD Mastering **Digital Cinema United**  
Subtitling **The Engine House**  
Design **Obviously Creative**  
Artist **Daren Thienel**

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