**Movie Review by Gary Jason**

“Departures." Yojiro Takita/Regent. Here Media (2009), 131 minutes.

Some time back, I published an article defending human organ sales as a way to deal with the massive numbers of patients currently awaiting organ donation. I was surprised by the response of a number of people close to me. It wasn’t that they felt my arguments were not logically and factually sound; rather, it was that they were repelled by the very idea of a market in body parts. They all evinced a deep-seated disgust at dealing in a commercial way with body parts and cadavers, a visceral aversion that blocked logical thought. This didn’t surprise me—evolutionary psychology suggests that people have an innate aversion to touching the dead. After all, the dead are often dead from contagious disease, and such an aversion would therefore confer survival value on those who had it.

This corpse aversion is at the heart of a fascinating Japanese movie that played in limited release last year, and is now available on DVD in rental venues and through Amazon. Called “Departures,” it was a surprise winner of the 2009 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, and enjoyed major critical and commercial success in Japan. This was amazing, both in the size of the box office receipts—over $60 million—and in the face of the Japanese cultural taboo about openly discussing thanatological matters.

The movie is adapted from an autobiography by Aoki Shinmom entitled *Coffinman: The Journey of a Buddhist Mortician.* The lead character, Daigo Kobayashi (Masahiro Motoki), is a young cellist in a Tokyo orchestra. The movie opens with Daigo learning suddenly that the orchestra is going out of business and he is out of a job. He has to tell his wife that he is giving up his profession as a classical musician, selling his expensive cello, and moving them back to his hometown, Sakata.

I chose the words “tell her” carefully: at the outset of the movie we see her as docile and uncritically supportive. She meekly acquiesces, and they move to the small city in the remote prefecture of Yamagata. The choice of this locale was deliberate, I suspect, because this area of Japan has one of the highest percentages of elderly residents in the country.

Daigo has to look for work, while his wife adjusts to life in the small city. This part of the film is great comedy. Daigo sees a help-wanted ad placed by the “NK Agency” for someone to “assist departures.” He goes to the company expecting a travel agency, but learns, to his surprise, that it is what we might call a mortuary. Actually, this is not quite right: the Japanese term “nokan” (from which the agency gets its logo “NK”) translates as “encoffinment.” The coffin-man performs a highly ceremonial ritual washing and preparation of a corpse for burial. This ritual is done in the presence of the family, quite unlike in our culture, where the mortician prepares the body without the family being present.

Daigo meets the agency owner Shoei Sasaki (Tsutomu Yamazaki), who instantly decides to hire Daigo, offering him a very large salary. Daigo is shocked and repelled. Going from musician to mortician--or assistant corpse preparer-- would be a rough transition in any society, but much more so in Japan. But having found no other work, he reluctantly accepts. Back at home, when Mika asks what his new job is, he deceives her by using a misleading euphemism (viz., that he will be working in the “ceremonial occasions industry”) that leads her to think he is doing weddings.

Daigo’s start in the business is trying, to say the least. He first has to play a corpse in an instructional video his employer is producing. He then has to accompany his boss on a particularly gruesome assignment: retrieving the corpse of an elderly woman who has died alone and lain undiscovered for two weeks. He stops by a sento (a communal bathhouse) on his way home to cleanse himself and get rid of the smell.

But as he continues to work, he begins not merely to assist Mr. Sasaki, but to perform the rituals himself. He then begins to value the work. He starts to understand that it has a valuable function. He sees that it comforts families and enables them to come together and reconcile themselves to the death. At home, he recovers his passion for playing the cello.

Now, at this point, the viewer wonders whether we have here a case of rationalization in the face of cognitive dissonance. Daigo has a good paying job, but doing something that even those closest to him would regard as shameful. So is he merely convincing himself that it is a valuable service in order to assuage his self-doubt?Or is there a greater lesson to be learned here about life, death, and the way we deal with the inevitable transition between the two?

This issue is resolved as the film moves towards a surprising end, as Daigo takes on two more services. In the first, both Daigo’s wife Mika and his friend Yamashita (Tetta Sugimoto) come to understand and appreciate Daigo’s new profession. And in the second, it is Daigo himself who reaches a deeper understanding of what it is he does.

Through what we see, we viewers also reach an understanding. We grasp that this seemingly bizarre custom, preparing the dead while the family moves on, is extremely well fitted to their society, *precisely because* of its taboo on discussing death openly.

The acting is simply magnificent. Masahiro Motoki’s portrayal of Daigo is perfectly nuanced**,** and both Ryoko Hirsue and Tetta Sugimoto give excellent performances in support. Kimiko Yo, who plays Yuriko Uemura, Daigo’s co-worker at the NK Agency, gives a really fine performance as a woman whose outwardly placid demeanor belies a very dark inner secret. Especially noteworthy is Tsutomu Yamazaki’s powerful but restrained performance as the quiet yet insightful and intuitive Mr. Sasaki.

All of this is aided by a superb score and excellent photography.

This film withstandscomparison with some of the finest classic Japanese films, which is to say it withstands comparison with some of the greatest films ever made.