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Wisconsin Film Festival: 'Departures' arrives for special showing

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"Departures," the Japanese film that won this year's Oscar for Best Foreign Film, was added to the Wisconsin Film Festivals lineup last week. - Promotional

Because 198 films somehow just wasn't enough, the Wisconsin Film Festival went ahead and booked Film No. 199.

A week ago, the festival announced that it was adding one more film to the schedule, a special lunchtime screening on Friday, April 3 at the UW-Cinematheque screening room. But the last-minute booking was worth it (and sold out fast), because the film was "Departures," a Japanese movie that somehow won the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar this year despite hardly being seen in the United States.

"Departures" beat out better-known foreign films like France's "The Class" and Israel's "Waltz With Bashir" for the Oscar. And it deserved to.

The film by director Yojiro Takita is a strange and beautiful movie that deftly shifts between black comedy and heartfelt poignancy. In the film, an unemployed cellist named Kobayashi moves from Tokyo back to his hometown and into his late mother's house.

Desperately seeking employment, he answers a want ad in the paper looking for help with "departures."

"Maybe it's for a travel agency," he tells his wife. Nope, it's actually for a mortuary that's looking for an assistant to help prepare bodies for cremation.

The first half-hour of the film is dryly funny, as the horrified cellist learns the ins and outs of the undertaking business (including a hilarious scene where he plays the body in a mortuary training video) and gradually learns to overcome his revulsion.

But then the film shifts into more emotional territory, as we see the impact that the undertakers' rituals, the washing and wrapping of bodies ("with gentle affection," the cellist notes) has on grieving friends and families, who -- according to Japanese tradition -- sit and watch the entire process. After he loses his distaste for handling the dead, Kobayashi finds he appreciates life all the more, digging into food, music and sex with a newfound zest.

The final section of the movie shifts the movie again, this time into personal territory for Kobayashi's character. The entire journey is very moving, with some gorgeous cinematography and nicely understated acting from all corners.

"Departures" will be returning to Madison for a theatrical run in mid-June, but was brought to the festival thanks to indie distributor Regent Entertainment's CEO, Stephen Jarchow, a University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate who brought several other Regent films. It's only the third time the film has screened in the United States and the first since its upset Oscar win.

For festival director Meg Hamel, even though she knew many moviegoers already had their plates full, it was an opportunity she just couldn't pass by.

"How many people here are already planning to see at least 12 other films during the festival?" she asked the crowd before the screening. Over two dozen hands shot up. Is there still time to find Film No. 200?