

Living

One of the great exemplars of 20th century Japanese cinema is “Ikiru” (*to live*), directed and co-written by the master Akira Kurosawa in 1952. The tale features a bureaucratic paper-pusher mired in a barren government job until he belatedly comes to life and takes action on a positive project. With the lead played by the great Takashi Shimura, the film won international honors and represented a change from Kurosawa’s usual action pictures.

After long marinating, that drama has finally been adapted for an English-language audience and set in 1950’s London by the Japanese-British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro (author of “Remains of the Day” and “Never Let Me Go”, *inter alia*). The adaptation stays quite true to the spirit of the Japanese original, with appropriate English touches and equivalents, but principally through a superb reincarnation of the lonely bureaucrat by Bill Nighy.

The film opens with a callow new employee, Peter Wakeling (Alex Sharp), beginning his new job at the London Public Works Department, where he is warned immediately about the unknowable Mr. Williams (Nighy), a paragon of inaction in their unit, an exemplar of do-nothing. Williams is a recent widower, but still has a son (Barney Fishwick)--who is utterly indifferent to him--and a daughter-in-law, but they are wholly wound up in their own lives. A visit to his doctor brings bad news: he has but six months to live from end-stage cancer.

Alone in a pub, he tells a waitress about his medical fate, a conversation overheard by man-about-town Sutherland (Tom Burke), who urges him to undertake a beachside pub crawl with him. But the binge night doesn’t take. He tries to clumsily charm an ambitious young woman from his own office, Miss Harris (Aimee Lou Wood)), but that too doesn’t go any farther than halting, uneasy conversations.

His grim diagnosis, however, somehow triggers Williams to action. Knowing his time is short, he first abruptly abandons his office and goes on a private seaside holiday, but most importantly, he decides to change his life and speed up a long-delayed community request to build a small neighborhood park.

Through these vagaries, Williams is ever the taciturn stork in the black suit, slow to speak and to reveal his emotions. Tentative and timid, he opens up (slightly) only in his final weeks when he finally has a job to do by standing up to his own bureaucracy.

Such a role is catnip for Bill Nighy (73), often a flinty figure in British films who has made a career of such men. Over some 70 films since the 1980’s, his portraits of Brit restraint have graced films like “The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel,” (2012), “Pride,” (2014), “The Bookshop,” (2017), and “Emma” (2019), as well as

“Living,” while his comedic chops were acclaimed as a has-been rock singer in “Love Actually” (2002), the film that introduced him to a world-wide audience.

Directed with taste and acumen by Oliver Hermanus (a South African helmsman), and outlined beautifully in Ishiguro’s delicate and sensitive script, “Living” is much aided by a series of classy production elements of period London, exhibiting luminous cinematography, production design, and music. Like its Japanese model, “Living” caps its narrative with a poignant remembrance of a fellow on a swing in a delicate snowfall that redeems this man of no importance.

(Now in theaters, the film is rated “PG-13” and runs 142 mins.)

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