

Living (2022)

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Note: In order to discuss properly this film there are some spoilers in the second half of the review, so you might want to wait until you have seen the film to finish reading this.



Mr. Williams looks like a million other London bureaucrats on their way to work—and acts like one to, until... (c) Sony Pictures Classics

Akira Kurosawa's 1952 drama about a Tokyo bureaucrat searching for meaning in the last months of his life is one of the Japanese master's most revered and touching films. For me the thought of remaking this is like remaking *Casablanca*. And yet South African director Oliver Hermanus has done so, and the results are far better than I could have imagined. Fortunately, he worked with a British novelist born in Japan, Nobel Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro, whose script captures the nuances of Kurosawa's original one, while transposing the setting to London, also during the early 1950s. (He also wrote the book that details how another older Englishman who misses out on life, also made into a haunting film, *The Remains of the Day*.)

And so Mr. Watanabe becomes Mr. Williams (Bill Nighy), the head of a small contingent of bureaucrats in the city's Public

Works Division whose main mission seems to be to receive and stamp papers and reports and then to file them away to oblivion. Each desk has a tower of baskets into which the documents are placed. The staff, one young woman and a couple of older men, go about their work mostly in solemn silence. No joking or kibitzing here or around a water cooler. Like millions of other men, Mr. Williams wears a bowler hat and carries an umbrella and briefcase, emerging from the suburban train every day at the same minute, and walking to his office. Routine, stability, are paramount values in life. He is not interested in the feelings or personal lives of his staff, only in their maintaining the routine of the agency. One new character is introduced by the Brits into the original plot, the young Mr. Wakeling (Alex Sharp), reporting to his first day on the job. Notice the omission of first names; formality rules in this office.

When a group of upset women arrive with a petition to turn the site of a bombed-out building into a children's playground, we, along with Mr. Wakely, soon are given a lesson in the first law of bureaucracy—never accept responsibility for anything, always pass the buck. The women have already been referred from one office to the next. This time Mr. Wakely is told to accompany the women to the "right" office, and so the runaround continues, with the group climbing up and down spacious stairways, entering and exiting numerous warrens and told where they should go. The women's proposed project would require vigorous activity, the assuming of responsibility and seeing to its details, something that no one wants to assume. Those who do not know the plot of the original might forget the women's project or think of it as only intended to illustrate the frustrations of a bureaucracy, but it will emerge from the background later on.

Upon visiting his doctor, Mr. Williams learns that he has incurable cancer. He has six, maybe nine months to live. He receives the bad news with typical British stoicism. He lives

with his son Michael (Barney Fishwick) and daughter-in-law Fiona (Patsy Ferran), but when that night he asks his son to sit with him a while so they can talk, the young man brushes him off, saying he doesn't have the time. Here, and later when we see the three together at the supper table, we surmise that they have never been close. The old man must bear his burden alone.

The next day at the office the others wonder at his absence. The female staff member Miss Harris (Aimee Lou Wood) will be leaving to take a better job at a restaurant and would like a letter of recommendation, but no Mr. Williams. Elsewhere in the city Mr. Williams withdraws half his life savings, buys enough sleeping pills to kill himself, but stops first at a seaside restaurant where he overhears Mr. Sutherland, an engaging young writer, complaining about his insomnia. Apparently deciding against suicide, Mr. Williams calls the man over to his table and gives him the bottles of pills, enough for months of use. In turn, Sutherland conducts his new friend on a tour of bohemian nightspots. The older man is given a less formal hat and in one café joins the piano player to sing an old Scottish folk song he remembers from childhood. We sense that this might be one of the few times since he was a boy that he has enjoyed life.

Returning to London, but not to work—his colleagues are astonished at his absence—he encounters Miss Harris on the street and learns that she has left her old job with the promise of assuming a managerial position at a restaurant. Admiring her youthful energy, he invites her to lunch with the promise of writing her the letter of recommendation she needs. A gossipy neighbor spots the two together, draws the wrong conclusion, and soon tells Fiona about the rendezvous. She in turn fears scandal and so urges Michael to talk to the old man. He cannot bring himself to do it, and so their suppers remain sad moments of silence.

Mr. Williams begins to feel the ravages of his disease. He

visits London's parks and spends as much time as possible with Miss Harris, escorting her to a posh restaurant far beyond her station. Feeling more comfortable with him, she confides that each of the staff had a nickname for him, that hers was "Zombie." He is able to laugh at this, realizing its appropriateness—earlier he had said that he was neither happy nor unhappy. They enjoy going to a movie together. Williams returns to discover a cause worth spending the remainder of his life for—it is that petition for a park that had been filed away. The sequence in which he leads some of his staff to the various offices to which he, like the women, is directed is inspiring. At times begging, always refusing to take "No" for an answer, he manages to secure all of the clearances needed for the lot to be cleaned up and the builders to enter and construct the much needed playground. Soon the three mothers are with him enjoying watching the work progress.

After his death, the staff and mothers join the family at the funeral, after which the son tries to discover from Miss Harris if his father had known that he was dying. Her reply is ambiguous, but he realizes the truth. At the agency there is danger that a superior bureaucrat will be given credit, and the office staff reminisce about their former boss. They decide that he is the good example that they should follow—what Jesus called "light" for others, the "salt" that makes a difference. Then comes their chance to do so with the arrival of a new set of papers—what will they do?

The last scene might result in a tear or two, and certainly is great for preaching/teaching. Mr. Wakely visits the park one snowy night and gazes at one of the empty swings. A constable approaches and during their talk in which Mr. Wakely says he knew the man responsible for the park, the officer says he saw him on the swing, singing a folk song. The cop expresses guilt that he had not warned the old man about the intense cold. Mr. Wakely assures him that Mr. Williams was probably happier at

that moment than he had ever been before, and therefore he should not worry.

Besides having the right scriptwriter, director Oliver Hermanus also has the right actor to replace Takashi Shimura as the conformance bureaucrat in Bill Nighy. Hitherto, though he played a supportive part in numerous films, my favorite memory of him was that of the art curator in the episode of Dr. Who in which the Doctor and Amy conduct the painter Vincent van Gogh to a Paris art exhibit of the artist's works. I always shed a tear when I watch this moving episode on YouTube, and the last shot showing Mr. Williams happily swinging while singing, repeating the iconic shot from the original movie, evoked further tears, as well as joyful recognition. This parable, attacking soul-deadening bureaucracy while raising up the life-affirming act of serving the welfare of others, is a joy to behold. It also might lead the serious minded viewer to take a stroll through the Book of Ecclesiastes, a book that urges us to consider the inevitability of death and the contemplation of how we should spend our brief lives.

There need be no apologies for this remake. The filmmakers value the universality of Akira Kurosawa's humanistic vision and its meaning for us some 70 years after the original film was released. For people of faith it is the perfect example of what Jesus was getting at in his declaration following the Beatitudes. It is an inspiring affirmation that a life that benefits others is worth living and celebrating.

This review will be in the February issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.