

Drive My Car from Japan: The triumph of simply “carrying on”

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Directed by Ryūsuke Hamaguchi; co-written by Hamaguchi and Takamasa Oe

Drive My Car is directed by Japanese filmmaker Ryūsuke Hamaguchi. Adapted from a 2014 short story by Haruki Murakami, it is co-written by Hamaguchi and Takamasa Oe. The film also makes mention or includes portions of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* and Anton Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya*.

Hamaguchi’s movie has had considerable success in the festival and awards circuit so far. *Drive My Car* had its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival last year, where it gained three awards, including Best Screenplay. It has earned four Academy Award nominations, for Best Picture, Best Director, Best International Feature Film and Best Adapted Screenplay, and it also won Best Foreign Language Film at the Golden Globe Awards.

In our view, the acclaim is vastly overblown. This nearly three-hour production may be striving for something real or serious but does not achieve it. *Drive My Car* is a largely gloomy and tedious work that does not tell us much, if anything, about contemporary life. That such a self-involved, trite film is heaped with praise—for example, a “flat-out masterpiece ... enthralling from first scene to last”—says more about the preoccupations of certain social strata than it does about anything else. With the world on a knife-edge, this is what such people concern themselves with.

The film begins with a 40-minute semi-prologue set in Tokyo. Actor and theater director Yūsuke Kafuku (Hidetoshi Nishijima) is married to television screenwriter Oto (Reika Kirishima), whose inspirations arrive during sexual climax (“She’d grasp a thread of a story from the edge of orgasm”). This sets the tone for subsequent developments.

Yūsuke is currently working on *Waiting for Godot*, as

he prepares to play the lead in a production of *Uncle Vanya*. Shortly after he is diagnosed with glaucoma and faces the possibility of losing his eyesight, his wife suddenly succumbs to a cerebral hemorrhage. The grief-stricken Yūsuke is aware that Oto had many extramarital affairs, which were apparently important for her art. In one scene, he surreptitiously views his wife making love to a young, bad-boy celebrity actor Kôji (Masaki Okada). What binds but also estranges the couple is the tragic loss of a daughter 20 years earlier.

Sometime following his wife’s death, Yūsuke accepts a job directing another production of *Uncle Vanya* at an arts festival in Hiroshima. The cast will feature Japanese, Chinese and Korean actors speaking multiple languages, including sign language. But the veteran actor refuses to play Vanya this time, because “Chekhov is terrifying ... When you say his lines, it drags out the real you.” Instead, he casts the far too young Kôji, his wife’s former lover, in the role.

Yūsuke chooses to be lodged an hour away from the rehearsal venue, as a portion of his theatrical preparation involves listening to the deceased Oto on tape reciting the Chekhov work. Consequently, he must then accept the rules of the festival that he be driven to the theater and back each day. This brings the emotionally burdened artist into contact with a stifled, sullen driver, Misaki (Tôko Miura), with whom he begins to develop a peculiar relationship.

In a ponderous scene, both Yūsuke and Misaki discover and articulate guilt feelings, respectively involving his wife and her mother. Neither revelation is especially earth-shaking or illuminating. The production of *Uncle Vanya* proceeds. We ultimately see Misaki in the audience while Yūsuke performs.

One critic argues that *Drive My Car*’s “brilliance lies in its celebration of the dirtiness of life, and how our

greatest triumphs exist in simply carrying on.” Under genuinely traumatic circumstances that might be the case. The filmmakers do not demonstrate that these are such circumstances or that merely “enduring” is the appropriate response to the protagonists’ difficulties. A sense of proportion is seriously lacking.

The glumness and resignation of the central characters no doubt reflect something real about the Japanese middle class in particular, after years and years of political and cultural stagnation. However, impressionistically registering moods on the surface of society does not constitute artistic “brilliance,” and simply “carrying on” is not a “triumph” under any condition.

Beckett and Chekhov had their serious limitations, but their work amounts to more than that. *Drive my Car* suggests that the filmmakers are overwhelmed by the immediate situation in Japan and too intellectually sluggish to seriously explore its social roots and trajectory.

Neither the climactic sequence referred to above nor the film as a whole is made more tolerable by Eiko Ishibashi’s lugubrious score and Hidetoshi Shinomiya’s shadowy cinematography. In fact, the most dynamic part of the film is its peripheral plot device—the final staging of *Uncle Vanya*.

Again, let us point to what various reviewers have said about this foolish, pretentious movie. One writes glowingly about Hamaguchi’s having explored “the intricacies of grief and intimacy” and having given “an incredibly touching glimpse of real empathy.” Another critic’s musing that “there’s little he [the filmmaker] couldn’t capture about the life of the mind” leads one to question the life of the mind that could make this assertion about such a dull, banal work. “[H]aunting and true, melancholy and wise,” writes another reviewer about *Drive My Car*. The film review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes registers a 98 percent approval rating for 169 reviews of the film.

As we have previously argued on numerous occasions, one can shy away from the difficult task of examining the concrete conditions that have a bearing on important aspects of life—that’s easy enough to do, and quite acceptable these days—but the result is a cinema that marginalizes itself, renders itself largely insignificant.

Drive My Car stands in contrast to mid-century

Japanese cinema, one of the glories of postwar cultural life (Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, Ozu, Naruse, Ichikawa, Imamura and many others), which looked closely and audaciously into the sources and consequences of authoritarianism, war, violence and foreign occupation. Japanese filmmakers tackled major issues head on, demonstrating a moral fearlessness that, among other things, could mercilessly critique an officialdom that had led Japan into a cataclysm.

It is revealing that the immense tragedy—the August 1945 atomic bombing by the US military—associated with the setting for much of *Drive My Car*, Hiroshima, goes entirely unmentioned.

In 1998, in an obituary for legendary Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998), the WSWS commented: “At his best Kurosawa demonstrated an extraordinary visual and intellectual vivacity. Whatever his limitations—and there are moments when his conceptions seem overmatched by his emotions—one feels that Kurosawa never shied away from any problem or dilemma. His is a cinema of towering, almost superhuman confrontations, whether in medieval forests or modern city streets. He created, as one critic puts it, ‘dense fictional worlds,’ in which his fascination with human nature and social problems was given free range.”

In much more recent times, Miwa Nishikawa’s *Under the Open Sky* (2020) compassionately centers on a man who comes out of prison after a long sentence. The WSWS wrote that veteran actor Koji Yakusho “gives a beautiful, nuanced performance as a tortured soul for whom Japanese society has no place.” In its own fashion, Hirokazu Koreeda’s *The Truth* (2019) was also an intriguing work. Two valuable Asian or Asian-American films, *Parasite* and *Minari*, loomed large at the 2020 and 2021 Academy Awards ceremonies, respectively. Those last works were vibrant, complex and also amusing, peppered with plebeian humor—and socially sharp. *Drive My Car*, by contrast, is a largely pointless film.



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