

Living: A “sort of dead” civil servant comes to life

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Living, directed by South African filmmaker Oliver Hermanus (*Shirley Adams*, *Beauty*, *The Endless River*), is a drama about a British civil servant in 1950s London who has come to lead an intensely stifled existence. When he learns he is suffering from a terminal illness, he attempts, in his last few months, to begin to actually live again.

Scripted by famed British-Japanese novelist Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Remains of The Day*, *Never Let Me Go*), *Living* is a “reimagining” of Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa’s 1952 masterpiece *Ikiru* (*To Live*), which in turn was originally inspired by Leo Tolstoy’s novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886).

In 1953, Rodney Williams (Bill Nighy) is a frosty, emotionally remote senior bureaucrat with a military gait employed by the London County Council’s Public Works Department. He and his subordinates ride the same train each and every day from the suburbs, but, typically, as one of them expounds to newcomer Peter Wakeling (Alex Sharp), Williams “never travels with us. But he always manages to be at exactly the right spot to greet us. The way he was just now.”

Williams runs an officious department in which desks are heaped with folders stacked high like “skyscrapers,” including requests from citizens connected to rebuilding parts of the city damaged or destroyed by German bombing during the Second World War. The staff, which now includes Wakeling, who take their cue from boss Williams, are seat-warmers and pencil pushers. Their express purpose, as bowler-hatted “gentlemen,” is to make sure that almost nothing gets accomplished. Sticking one’s neck out, going against the flow or standing up to one’s superiors is simply not done.

Confronted with one or another document that has been passed around from department to department, Williams is wont to insert it into the middle of one of the giant piles of papers on his desk, with the fatal words, “Then we can keep it here for now. It’ll do no harm.”

Williams spends his days shuffling papers with such deadly routinism that his secret office nickname, as we learn later, is “Mr. Zombie” (because zombies, he is eventually told, are “sort of dead and not dead.”) A widower, he is alienated from his son Michael (Barney Fishwick) and daughter-in-law Fiona (Patsy Ferran), who treat him like a piece of worn-out furniture

and very much wish he would dole out more money to them.

Then, Williams learns he has a cancer diagnosis and only months to live. He withdraws half of his life savings intending to commit suicide in a coastal resort. Unable to go through with it (“I did think about it. But I don’t have it in me. That kind of thing.”), he meets a local writer (Tom Burke) who introduces him to the seaside town’s garish underbelly. A drunk Williams even gets to perform a lovely Scottish folk song, “The Rowan Tree.”

Dissatisfied and disquieted, however, he returns to London, where he runs into Margaret Harris (Aimee Lou Wood), a vivacious young woman and one of his former underlings. Her liveliness attracts and fascinates him, helping him come back to life. Williams ultimately returns to his desk intending to accomplish at least one good deed and help others, thereby also lifting himself out of his own previously petrified state.

At one point, he explains to Margaret how he became the way he was: “How did it happen? I fancy it crept up on me. The days proceeding one after the next. Each with their little burdens and defeats. Small wonder I didn’t notice what I was becoming. But then I looked at you and remembered. What it was like, to be alive like that –”

Pushing aside all obstacles, Williams finds a final purpose in life by fulfilling the request of a group of working class women to build a park in a battered part of their neighborhood. They describe it as a “cesspool. No other word for it. There’s no-one been near it since the Germans dropped that bomb. Rats as huge as that, and our houses backing right onto it.” The women, “weary but stoic,” expect nothing to come of their request. One sums up the Public Works Department as “a good old Punch and Judy show. We the citizens are Judy. And all you lot are Mr. Punch.” Williams determines to overcome all obstacles on their behalf, even at the risk of challenging—and affronting—the lofty chairman of the London County Council, Sir James (Michael Cochrane).

Living has interesting antecedents and sources, and a talented screenwriter, and cast. It seems well-intentioned. Presumably, the filmmakers want to critique middle-class respectability, along with bureaucratic inaction and neglect, at its soul-destroying worst.

One of the most sensitive moments in the stylish and sleek-

looking film occurs during an encounter at Williams' funeral between his son Michael and Margaret. Williams, it turns out, never told Michael about the fatal diagnosis, and the older man's death came as a shock. Michael is devastated when he realizes his father was not able to reveal this most important, intimate fact to his own son. He has to approach Margaret to be enlightened as to his father's illness and final months: "Did my father know he was ill? That he was dying, I mean?" he asks. "Because if he knew. And he told you ... You see what I mean? ... Why wouldn't he tell me?" Shame and bewilderment overcome him.

In *Living*'s final scenes, Williams's former colleagues agree that he "changed" in the last days of his life, and it had been on account of that "playground business." Their former superior, one of them maintains admiringly, became "obsessed. He was prepared to make himself a right bugger about it ..."

In a final letter to Wakeling, Williams endeavors, he writes to "counsel" the young man, "if I may. Should there come days when it is no longer clear to what end you are directing your daily efforts, when the sheer grind of it all threatens to reduce you to the kind of state in which I so long existed, I urge you then to recall our little playground, and the modest satisfaction that became our due upon its completion."

The film's thrust is humane, but its themes and satirical efforts are somewhat diluted and diffuse. Nighy is a renowned and much-beloved performer (he was nominated for an Academy Award for the performance here), but the filmmakers are too easy on themselves in over-reliance on his character's comic mannerisms, both in his mummified state and during his eventual "revivification." *Living*'s concentration on Nighy, through no fault of his, becomes something of a diversion from its providing a fuller, more complex picture of the society.

Furthermore, Williams's son and daughter-in-law are treated more kindly than in *Ikiru*, in which they are portrayed as grasping, unpleasant petty bourgeois obsessed with an inheritance. A less pointed and urgent work than the Kurosawa film, *Living* does not paint an acute enough portrait either of the strangling of life or its possible alternative. Moreover, rather than playing a pivotal role, the three working class protesters who ardently petition for the park are given relatively short shrift.

Post-World War II Britain had an angry, restive and militant working class, socialistic in its general orientation, and that element is missing in Hermanus' film, which offers a more-or-less one-sided picture of the period. It even threatens to become sentimental and complacent, especially in its extended closing scene.

Kurosawa was a more exacting social critic. By the time he directed *Ikiru*, his earlier political radicalism (he traveled in "proletarian art" and Communist Party circles in the late 1920s and early 1930s) had been eroded by events, including no doubt the evolution of the Soviet Union under Stalin. At least, his 1952 film suggests, if a human being can't change the world in

its entirety, he or she can do *one* important thing for others in his or her life and do it sincerely and passionately.

As the WSWS pointed out in a comment on *Ikiru*, at the time of its remastering and re-release in 2003, the film, whose title "means 'to live' ... was released only a few years after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki." In the "scenes of Tokyo nightlife in particular, *Ikiru* hints at desperation and hysteria, perhaps a mania to forget, that speaks in its own way to the wartime horrors."

Furthermore, in the great filmmaker's view, submission "to authority, self-abnegation and conformism had led the Japanese to the disaster of the war. The social cancer remained, not visible to the naked eye." Kurosawa argued that while a radical social transformation was no longer on the agenda, life could still have significance, "despite its tragedies and absurdities, through the individual meaningful act." The director "retained enough of his left-wing ideas to include the presence of the neighborhood women as an adjunct or necessary component of this act."

In an interview with rogerebert.com, Bill Nighy weighed in with his own thoughts about psychological repression, social decency and more general problems. Speaking of the character, Williams, and his extreme reserve, the actor pointed out that "in those days, one's behavior was constrained to a much larger degree by society."

Nighy noted that the "violent opposite" of this inobtrusive "heroism" was often expressed in "our leadership, the people who become eminent in the world, the people who make a lot of money. Not all of them, it's not by definition, but often the damaged people who rise to what's called the 'top' of our societies ... do not reflect that." He went on to argue that "quiet people" like Williams, "who persist in attempting to be straightforward in their dealings with everyone else, to be honest, and to be kind, they take on a heroic appearance within the context of all the dishonesty and lies, within the power-grabbing that goes on with those that are in less good shape."

Speaking with anger about society's "tops," Nighy accused them of attempting "to divide us all the time," and in so doing "do intolerable damage to our communities in all areas. But there are millions and billions of decent people around, who attempt to do the right thing." He continued: "We're up against an enormous amount of hugely time-honored, ancient, elaborate constructs that were built on lies, deception, and manipulation, by people hungry for power."

Living has certain positive qualities, but unfortunately, as a whole, the film does not measure up even to the perceptiveness of these comments.



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