



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 16 September 2022

Drive My Car

Japan | 2021 | 159 min | Cert 15

Director: Ryusuke Hamaguchi

Screenplay: Haruki Murakami (short story)
Ryûsuke Hamaguchi, Takamasa Oe (Screenplay)

Starring: Hidetoshi Nishijima, Toko Miura,
Reika Kirishima

Spoiler warning: these notes are best read after viewing the film as they contain plot and character details.

There's a moment in Seamus Heaney's poem 'Clearances' when he recalls peeling potatoes with his mother. Neither looked at one another, or paused. But their shared task offered intimacy – they were 'Never closer', Heaney writes, 'the whole rest of our lives'.

A similar, understated kind of intimacy propels the central relationship in Ryusuke Hamaguchi's latest feature film *Drive My Car*, which marks his second time in Competition at Cannes. Since making his first film in 2008, and with increasing momentum since his breakthrough epic *Happy Hour* in 2015, Hamaguchi has been quietly building an oeuvre of dramas that revolve around romantic tangles, people who work in theatre and what ties these themes together – social scripts, performance, deception, memory. Much of this latest film takes place in the car of the title – a red Saab, to be precise. Precision is key for Hamaguchi's tragicomedies of manners and for the Haruki Murakami short story on which this film is based. The film adheres closely to Murakami's text, though it makes its own detours. (In Murakami's story the Saab is yellow; Hamaguchi's red substitute looks exquisite against the snow in the film's closing scenes, shot in Japan's northernmost region Hokkaido.)

A theatre actor, Mr Kafuku, loses his wife, whom he secretly knows was unfaithful to him. Much of the film is concerned with how Mr Kafuku spends his days, rehearsing Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* with a multilingual cast of actors at a theatre in Hiroshima.

The theatre hires a driver to transport Mr Kafuku between his house, rehearsals and various appointments. The driver is a young, brusque woman from Hokkaido called Misaki. Over the course of the film she and Mr Kafuku gradually learn more about each other's lives and form a tender bond. Like



Heaney and his mother, they find it easier to relate when they are sharing a task; for them this task takes the form of a journey. What begins as a shuttle between home and rehearsal spaces ends up taking the pair across Japan and on a journey through memory and loss. When not driving, Mr Kafuku processes his emotions by channelling them through his actors. Learning lines by endless, robotic repetition (often on a cassette tape played in the car) is his method for tapping into the emotional intensity of a character – and perhaps, he hopes, himself. No coincidence that he is rehearsing *Uncle Vanya*, a play first directed by Stanislavski, whose method mined an actor's inner motives to give personal resonance to a character's actions.

Over the course of the film (like others by Hamaguchi, *Drive My Car* is in no rush, though its three hours cannot compete with the five of *Happy Hour*), we come to realise that Mr Kafuku's interest in acting and role play is more than professional. His late wife – a television screenwriter – hid numerous affairs behind what seemed a happy marriage. In a twist of intelligence and provocation characteristic of Hamaguchi, Mr Kafuku concedes that fidelity would have been a lie for his wife: in both loving him dearly and being unfaithful, she was her genuine self. Later, Misaki mirrors this when she reflects on her mother's personality disorder, which produced alternative personas that probably constituted a more authentic and caring self. These details unfold between Mr Kafuku and Misaki in the car, on the road. The car's interior becomes a kind of heterotopia, a space outside conventional society and its strictures. It is intense, transformational, yet freeing in its mobility.

Role play and performance fascinate Hamaguchi, as evidenced in *Happy Hour* and, more recently, *Asako I & II* (2018) and *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy* (2021). *Drive My Car* contains many extended takes in which actors workshop lines and scenarios through improvisation. Language is key here – be it

Japanese, with its nuances of politeness and elliptical implication, or body languages and facial expressions. Mr Kafuku's cast for Uncle Vanya comprises actors who use Japanese, Korean, Mandarin and Korean Sign Language.

Like Hamaguchi, Mr Kafuku is interested in what can be said, emoted, translated and felt. Perhaps therein lies the key to his melancholy – Mr Kafuku's difficulty in expressing feelings breeds an interest in studying ways of expressing them. His late wife was called Oto; the written character for her name means 'sound', Mr Kafuku tells Misaki. Even after Oto's death her sound resonates through Mr Kafuku and Misaki's days, by way of the cassette recordings she made to help him learn scripts. As the Saab glides north, one gets the feeling that Mr Kafuku is growing closer not only to Misaki but also to Oto, the one woman driving his car, the other delivering him his lines.

Becca Voelcker, Sight and Sound, December 2021

Ryusuke Hamaguchi on 'Drive My Car'

Can you drive a car?

Not at all. (Laughs) I do have a licence, but I don't drive on my own. In my entire life I think I drove a car three times and that's it.

What was your initial response to Haruki Murakami's short story?

When it was released in 2013, a friend of mine told me that it resembled the style of my work and I might like it. When I first read it, I had a strange feeling that the story has somewhat the same vibe as my work. Since I tend to revolve around the ambience of the city's traffic, with vehicles going back and forth and the dialogue being set inside the car, the setting of Drive My Car sparked my interest. I thought that one day I would like to make a film out of it, also because there had been barely any attempts to adapt Murakami for the big screen. The idea for the film came back after Asako I & II [2018]. I knew that it would be impossible to adapt his long novels, but a short piece seemed achievable.

His Saab was yellow. Why is yours red?

It's a purely visual thing – there is not a lot of yellow in the Japanese landscape. Yellow is also not the best for the image. To grasp the vibrant scenery of moving vehicles, I had to think of the colour that would be more suitable. It couldn't be yellow. So I thought either blue or red would fit better. I even went to see a yellow Saab, but when I saw the red one we eventually used, that was it. It had this groovy and cool vibe.

There are no theatre rehearsals in the novel but in the film you show the whole process very carefully. Why?

The whole story is about a man striving to come back to life. My thoughts lingered on the question – how can one reclaim their life through art? I found the

answer in the flow of acting. At first, Kafuku is not able to act his loss out, but at the end of his journey he grasps his feelings through performance. That's a whole process he goes through, not as an actor, but also as a director. Through directing the others, he can grasp the essence of reality around him. As a matter of course, he renders a direction.

The way you work with actors during rehearsals resembles the scenes from the film. How did you work with the actors in Drive My Car ?

Indeed, much of the film's image of the rehearsals responds to my methods. With some exceptions because, after all, the film needs drama. I do focus on repetitions of reading the script without emotions included in it. We go through the text over and over again until the words become embedded in the actors' bodies and they can deliver the lines automatically. I want my actors to get rid of their expectations towards the characters but also avoid any clichés. It's all about nuances. Once the actors get on that level and the words blend with the body, the ability to deliver can spread in different directions. They become more focused; but above all, the process of opening up puts them at ease. And that is the most effective way to work with actors. To act while being relaxed. That's the core of my method – to get rid of anxiety. I invite my actors to reflect on the relationship between their characters and the past. I want them to examine how the present unfolds in the shadow of the past. We include that element in the rehearsals by recreating the character's memories and implementing that into expression. This is how we conceived the roles – through embodied lines and a fused past.

The play in the film is in different languages. Where did that come from?

I actually thought of using that for a different project. That was supposed to be a story of a Japanese actress going to France. There she acts to people from different countries, but her performance is entirely in Japanese so that people don't understand the words, only her expressions. The project probably won't happen but the idea stayed with me. And since I was thinking about a unique method of work for Kafuku, I realised it suits him well. The method has a sense of avant-garde approach but, above all else, it's very simplistic. Aside from the meaning of words we use, there is also a sense of connection, attention towards the texture of voice or body language. Our body starts to send us a spectrum of feelings. This is when our receptivity invites us to observe and listen. And while we do that simple performance, it starts to pile up, and we are allowed to feel the natural flow of emotions. It seemed to be a simple method from the start, but once I tried it, I realised it does indeed do wonders.

Interview by Łukasz Mańkowski, Sight and Sound, December 2021