

# "DEPARTURES" PUBLIC SCREENING



TOP: AUDIENCE ENJOYING  
"DEPARTURES" PUBLIC  
SCREENING AT UTSA

## おくりびと: The Gift of Last Memories

On November 11th, 2012, the East Asia Institute (EAI) hosted a public viewing of the movie "Departures." The screening, made possible by a generous grant from the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership began at 2:00 p.m. and was attended by over 120 guests. This event was another installment of the "Savor Japan: Series of Sensorial Experiences".

Daigo Kobayashi is a talented musician, but when his orchestra is abruptly disbanded, he suddenly finds himself without a steady source of income. Making the decision to move back to his small hometown, Daigo answers a classified ad for a company called "Departures" mistakenly assuming that he will be working for a travel agency. Upon discovering that he

will actually be preparing the bodies of the recently deceased for their trip to the afterlife as a "*nokanashi*" or "encoffiner" (the Japanese equivalent of an undertaker). Daigo accepts the position as gatekeeper between life and death in order to provide for himself and his young wife, and gradually gains a greater appreciation for life. But while Daigo's wife and friends universally resent his new line of work, he takes a great amount of pride in the fact that he is helping to ensure that the dead receive a proper send-off from this plane of being.

The conclusion of the film led to an open-floor panel discussion. The panelists included Ms. Yuko Kawabe, a Japanese language instructor at San Antonio College (SAC), Mr. Roger Pratt, a

former Japanese language instructor at UTSA, and Ms. Mao Yamada, a Communications major at UTSA. In addition, Ms. Mimi Yu, Associate Director of the EAI, and Dr. Makiko Fukuda, a Japanese language instructor at UTSA, acted as moderators for the forum.

Pratt explained to the audience the subtle differences between Buddhism and Shintoism. This statement was supported by Fukuda, who stated that the two are so integrated, it would be hard to draw defining lines between the two. Kawabe briefly explained how the people in Japan practice their religion, and how it differs from practices in America. In a way, religion in Japan is a matter of convenience and customs. People take their children to temples when

they are born, and usually only pray at shrines when they need some sort of blessing from the *kami* (gods). The practices have become such an integral part of daily life that the actual religious beliefs are not as strong. Yamada mentioned that most Japanese people do not exclusively identify themselves as adherents of a single religion, but they incorporate elements of various religions in a syncretic fashion, and it would not be surprising if one were not to actually believe in Buddha. However, some believe in the ideal of rebirth after death, while others believe that once a person passes on, they ascend into the heavens to be reunited with their family.

Most guests were pleased with the film selection. Many positive praises could be heard amongst the crowd, despite the somewhat melancholic theme of the movie. "I enjoyed how they showed how each family dealt with losing a family member," mused Jared Gaitan, UTSA student. "The film displayed that a few families break out into a fight, some mask their pain with humor, while others remain solemn and quietly grieve to themselves." "We chose this particular film as it tells how Japanese view life, death, and faith along with human relationships and customs of Japan," said Mimi Yu. "One of the most beautiful and powerful films I have seen, *Okuribito* is a perfect way to introduce Japanese culture and to create a

dialogue to compare U.S. and Japanese society and customs."

Following the panel discussion, an *onigiri* social was hosted by Tomoe Kumashiro, EAI's Japan Outreach Coordinator, and was held outside the event room. Many guests participated and learned how to make Japanese rice balls while talking more amongst themselves about the film. *Onigiri* is a Japanese food that is made from white rice formed into triangular or oval shapes, and is often wrapped in *nori* (seaweed).

To make the venue more visually appealing, Ms. Miyako Wallace, a certified Sogetsu teacher, created two Ikebana displays: one made with chrysanthemums and branches, and another with purple lyndel and white flowers. With lively conversation, delicious food, and an elegant floral display, the event made for a delightful afternoon full of Japanese cultural exchange and broadened perspectives.

Altogether, the event turned out to be a great success. Attendance was high, and participants were eager to speak with one another and enjoy the food provided. The East Asia Institute was proud to host the day's happenings, and looks forward to the next similar event in the near future.



**FROM TOP:** POST FILM PANEL DISCUSSION, AN IKEBANA DISPLAY, *ONIGIRI* MAKING, AND AUDIENCE ENJOYING *ONIGIRI*.