



Farewell: Comedy of Life Begins with A Lie

グッドバイ 嘘からはじまる人生喜劇

2019/106min/Colour/English Subtitles
Distributor: Kino Films

Director: NARUSHIMA Izuru
Cast: OIZUMI Yo, OGAWA Tamaki, HASHIMOTO Ai

About DAZAI Osamu—the original author of “Farewell”

Dazai Osamu (real name, Tsushima Shūji, 1909-1948) was serializing his novel, *Guddo bai* (*Goodbye*), in the Asahi Shimbun newspaper in 1948. His suicide in June that year meant that the novel remained unfinished. The novel’s title rather neatly marks Dazai’s ‘goodbye’ to life itself, but it also serves as an appropriate epitaph to the tenuous relationship with life, and death, that informed his whole lifetime.

Dazai’s family origins helped influence the way he saw the world. He was the tenth child born to a family with peasant roots in Aomori Prefecture, northern Honshū. By the time of his birth, good business acumen had turned the Tsushima household into a powerful and highly respected family in the region. Dazai never overcame feelings of guilt about his own privileged upbringing compared to the poverty endured by other families in the area. Moreover, Dazai was brought up for years by a ‘mother’ who turned out to be his aunt. Perhaps ten children were too many for any biological mother to bear. The shock of discovering that his most fundamental relationship, between child and mother, was a lie left Dazai with lifelong questions about the nature of trust and self-identity. He demonstrated an inability to fully connect with others in a way that never stopped tormenting him.

Dazai’s life, as related through his largely autobiographical stories, tells of a deeply sensitive individual, highly vulnerable, painfully aware of unbridgeable gaps between people, yet always pushing to find some kind of spiritual or existential connection, no matter how temporary, and usually with an attractive female lover. Dazai established himself in the literary world during the 1930s with a series of well-received novels and short-stories. *Bannen* (*Declining Years*, 1936), for example, was a collection of fifteen stories that depicted the condition of self-isolation from different angles. What made such dark subject matter attractive to his readers was his exceptional literary style: bright, clear, poetic, sensitive.

Dazai always struggled in his relationship with alcohol and drugs, and he also had bouts of mental illness. He became seriously addicted in 1935 to the opiate pain killer, Paveral, which he was proscribed following a suicide attempt. He spent time in a mental institution the following year, where he gave up the drug cold turkey. Suicidal thoughts hung like a shadow over his life. His first suicide attempt in 1929 was followed by five or six more over the years until he finally drowned himself in the Tamagawa Canal, in Tokyo, with his lover on June 13, 1948. Their bodies were not found until June 19, which would have been Dazai’s 39th birthday.

It was in the immediate aftermath of World War II that Dazai became one of the first celebrities to satisfy a marketplace reshaped by commercial media under the influence of the American Occupation. While many of his fellow citizens felt

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liberated from fifteen years of oppressive militarism and now yearned for democracy, or for a Communist paradise, Dazai had a less rose-tinted point of view. He was associated with a group of post-war male writers known as the *Burai-ha* (*the Decadents*), characterized by their predilection for drink, drugs and womanizing. They were deeply sceptical about how Japanese society could so easily abandon the fundamental ideology of the war years in favour of the political ideals of its new political masters. Dazai became known as much for his string of lovers and 'decadent' behaviour as for his writing. Two novels from that period guarantee his position as one of Japan's foremost twentieth century writers.

Shayō (*The Setting Sun*, 1947) was so famous that its very title became a byword for the mood of loss and nostalgia in the immediate post-war years. It depicts a formerly rich family that has fallen on hard times in the wake of war defeat. The widowed, aristocratic mother soon dies, unable to stand post-war austerity for long. Her daughter takes a more positive outlook, consciously getting herself pregnant through a lover with aim of creating a new, more hopeful generation of Japanese. And a deeply traumatized son returns from the battlefields of the South Pacific, nothing more than a lost, suicidal drug addict. The story beautifully captures an elegiac mood for an irretrievable past, but also small buds of hope for the future even in the midst of post-war gloom.

The second major novel, *Ningen shikkaku* (*No Longer Human*, 1948), describes the life of a man who takes on a series of different identities (clown, lover, philosopher) in order to ingratiate himself with others. He feels totally estranged from life, in the vein of Dostoevsky's existential novel, *Notes from Underground* (1864). The character is portrayed in an unremittingly negative light, but self-identity is shown to be more complex. An objective witness appears right at the end in the book's epilogue to offer another picture: he was, it seems, 'an angel.' There is nothing heroic in either of these two novels. Or perhaps, merely to get through day after day in post-war Japan was heroic enough. Dazai certainly attracted a devoted readership. In fact, it was precisely the helpless, exposed, weak, self-pitying aspects of his characters (and Dazai himself in real life) that attracted people, even as others were repelled. Vulnerability was the source of Dazai's power over others, and he exploited it ruthlessly.

His novel, *Guddo bai*, was very much a work in progress when he died, but he did have time to set into motion a plot that showed great promise. A handsome, married editor feels trapped by the attention of his ten mistresses. A writer friend encourages him to pay a beautiful woman to act as his wife, and accompany him when he visits each lover to tell them it is over. He does indeed find the beautiful woman, and he does begin to dump his mistresses, but his relationship with the pretend wife brings inevitable complications. This is the core theme that the movie works with.

Prof. Stephen Dodd



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