



## Not Quite Dead Yet

一度死んでみた

2020/93min/Colour/English Subtitles

Distributor: Shochiku

Director: HAMASAKI Shinji

Cast: HIROSE Suzu, YOSHIZAWA Ryo, TSUTSUMI Shinichi

### Online screening information:

<b>Fri 26 Feb</b>	48 hour rental window from	6.00pm
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Like many comedies Hamasaki's *Not quite dead yet* deals with serious themes. The film focusses on family relationships, brought to crisis point through a surreal experiment on the father of the Nobata family. He is the head of a pharmaceutical company that is in the final stages of research on an anti-ageing drug, the secrets of which are suspected to have been leaked to a rival company. Nobata is put into a death-like state to trick the rivals into revealing their subterfuge. Thus we have the basis of a good comedy: a human theme interwoven with sub-plots that all have their own lives. Science for the benefit of mankind versus pharmaceutical profiteering; rebellious youth (epitomized by the daughter, Nanase) versus parental expectations; raucous heavy metal music versus tear-jerking crooning. These contrasts have more abstract counterparts, too: the visible world of appearances versus an invisible world where morality and truth become clear; and our modern, scientific world versus lore about the after-life that we have inherited from the past.

As most cultures have space for ghosts, Nanase's encounters with her supposedly dead father will not come across as particularly unusual. In fact the apparitions in this film are mostly this-worldly, although there are times when the ghosts – in traditional Japanese style – appear without lower legs and feet. But there are aspects of the film's treatment of death and the afterlife that are more consistently Japanese, so a few words of explanation may help our appreciation.

Historically, Buddhism has had a near monopoly on death, indeed the Japanese will often say that they are born Shinto and die Buddhist. Accordingly, Hamasaki shows us Buddhism's involvement with funerary practices, recalling Itami's *O-sōshiki* (The Funeral, 1984), which focusses on the social entanglements that surface at funerals. *Not quite dead yet* reflects important changes that have come about in the intervening decades. Younger generations have been much more critical about un-Buddhist aspects of the priesthood's involvement, epitomized perhaps by several shots of the officiating *o-bōsan* preening himself for the camera. And look out too for the screenshots of online purveyors of coffins.

There is also a cosmological dimension that is particular to the traditional Japanese world-view. The river that Nanase's father is rowed along after his death, is the Sanju no Kawa. *Sanju* are the three unfavourable destinies of the Buddhist-derived cosmology of the after-world. "Unfavourable", as in: you really don't want to be there: they are the worlds of hungry ghosts, of battling titans – and the hells. (The other three destinies, the favourable ones, aren't that great either.) The "Hell" noodle shop in the film ("hell noodles this", "hell noodles that" on the menus) refers comically to unspeakable post-mortem horrors for those whose mortal life transgressed universal moral norms. So Nobata is effectively being taken to the *sanju* as retribution for his failings in this life. Nevertheless, his wife (who died some time previously) seems to be doing fine, as she speaks to him from the far bank and looks forward to being with him again.

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There are other details that refer to post-mortem cosmology. Anyone who has been in Tokyo for longer than five minutes will probably have come across its circular line, the Yamanote. As the film builds to its climax, look out for the death metal drummer hammering away at Buddhist ritual implements whilst reciting the names of all the stations on the Yamanote line, to the tune of one of Buddhism's most popular chants. The allusion is to one of Buddhism's core tenets, that of the circle of birth, death and rebirth – the cycle of suffering that marks all existence. The Yamanote line goes round and round Tokyo, transporting vast numbers of suffering souls. At least it stops at night for three or four hours – the process of death and rebirth doesn't. In the lengthy denouement, we might ask ourselves how *Hamasaki* is challenging us to think about the value of this life.

**Dr Ian Astley**

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