



PREVIEW

Living

+ Q&A with director Oliver Hermanus, writer Kazuo Ishiguro and actor Aimee Lou Wood

Living began rather serendipitously. One night, when author Kazuo Ishiguro and producer Stephen Woolley were having dinner, Bill Nighy dropped by for a drink. '[They] are film nerds,' laughs Nighy of that evening. 'They sit and exchange names of significant figures who made films, mostly in black and white, between the years of 1930 and 1957. They challenge one another to name the designer, the director and who played the policeman at the end. At the end of dinner, Ishiguro and his wife were talking amongst themselves. Then they came out of a huddle and said, "We know what your next film should be". I said, "Well, when you feel comfortable, let me know".'

As Woolley remembers it, Ishiguro called him soon after that dinner and said that Nighy should star in a reimagining of *Ikiru*, the Akira Kurosawa film of 1952, transposed to London at around the same era. Woolley had fond memories of the film but hadn't watched it recently, so he screened it again, 'and cried and loved it', he says. He quickly saw the parallels.

'I've been wanting somebody to make a British version of this Japanese classic *Ikiru*, which I had loved for most of my life,' says Ishiguro. 'I think I first saw it when I was a boy on British TV, and it had a huge impact on me. Partly because of my Japanese background, but quite regardless of that, I think I always lived my life informed by the message in that film.' Ishiguro had long had the sense that the story could work in the UK. While *Ikiru* had dealt with the losing side of World War II, the job of reconstruction and rebirth was similar even for the winners – and there were parallels between the countries' sense of imperial entitlement, their stoicism and their emotional reserve. On that night at dinner, it suddenly seemed to come together.

'Ishiguro was inspired to think of Bill for this part,' says Woolley, 'because Bill brings such empathy. A common emotion between people in Japan and Britain, which I think Ishiguro has found, is that they both have the same stoic restraint. Japanese society and British society are based on a lack of effusiveness. Ishiguro quite rightly thought Bill was perfect to play that kind of character. I suggested to Ishiguro that he write the script. He said he was not very good at screenwriting.'

'I said, "You should get a proper screenwriter. Anyway, I'm writing a novel,"' remembers Ishiguro.

Woolley managed to persuade the Nobel and Booker Prize winner that he had the necessary skills, happily. That proved invaluable in securing the rights to the film from the Kurosawa estate, who were wary but intrigued at the promise of Ishiguro's involvement. 'The idea of teaming up Kurosawa with Ishiguro was something they couldn't resist, really,' says Woolley – at least once they were convinced it was really him, after a number of handwritten notes and a video call.

In writing his adaptation, rather than being intimidated by the towering reputation of the original, Ishiguro drew a strange comfort from it. 'All the

heavy lifting had been done. It's kind of a translation job,' he jokes. His writing approach was daring. He screened the Kurosawa film just once, after many previous viewings earlier in his life, and then decided not to watch it again, or look at its script, as he wrote his own English take. He drew elements from memories of sharing a commuter train to London as a schoolboy in the 1960s, watching older men head into London in their identical suits and hats, to create the film's opening scenes, and leaned on his longstanding fascination with Britain's pre- and post-war culture. Once he had his draft in place, it was time to assemble the creative team, and bring a director aboard. Woolley had always been keen to recruit a director from outside the UK. 'We decided – and I felt very passionate about this – that we should look at somebody that didn't have a preconceived idea of England. You're always going to get a more interesting perspective. I also felt very strongly that we needed a director who had a very, very cine-literate background. The thing about Akira Kurosawa and Ishiguro is the shared love of cinema.'

The producer had seen *Moffie*, Oliver Hermanus' 2019 war drama about gay recruits in the homophobic South African military of the 1980s, and was impressed by its sensitivity and use of resources to create a recent era. 'A vital key with *Moffie* is that you don't feel you're watching a stale period piece; you feel like you're watching something just as relevant today. Ishiguro was also impressed, and very open to the idea of having somebody on the project who would make a movie that was cinematic and, at the same time, fresh and new.'

After meeting the director, Woolley learned they also shared a deep appreciation of cinema greats – including Kurosawa and contemporaries like Ozu. He brought Hermanus to London to meet Film4 and Ishiguro. By the end of that meeting Hermanus knew he wanted to make the film, and he began working on the script with Ishiguro and Woolley. But he still had to reckon with the towering reputation of Akira Kurosawa's original. 'There was a photographic brilliance to what they were doing at that period in Japanese cinema, and every frame of *Ikiru* is like a photograph. So that was my panic attack [moment]. I had to go, OK, I need to not imitate any of these images. I need to think of my own. It's a fool's errand, but it didn't sound crazy in the end because Ishiguro was so confident about making this our own, without being in any way disrespectful to the original.'

Hermanus and Ishiguro honed and perfected the script to ready it for production over Zoom, in different countries, as the coronavirus pandemic swept the world. They'd talk for hours at a time about scenes to cut and what to add; then Ishiguro would write variations, and they'd meet and talk again. It was months before they locked their shooting script. 'There's a thoroughness, an intensity to Ishiguro's genius, where nothing is left unturned,' says Hermanus. 'So when you get to a finished script, he's pretty much mapped out every possible interpretation. He's a perfectionist that way.'

Ishiguro independently describes Hermanus as a perfectionist too, so perhaps they are simply built alike. 'I found it really enjoyable, discussing the script with Oliver and Stephen,' says the novelist. '[That process] is not always enjoyable; you have to be on the same wavelength. But every time, new ideas would be generated somewhere between us. In the end, we'd have some idea that we were all excited about.'

All three are huge cinephiles, and they swapped recommendations of films from and about Britain in the 1950s, 'so that this became a love letter to the

films of that period,' says Hermanus. He embraced the challenge of telling an English story, 'asking every question, wondering about everything, leaving no stone unturned' to learn everything he could about the period. 'That's the fun part of making films,' he says. 'You grow as a person through the making of it.'

Production notes

LIVING

Directed by: Oliver Hermanus
©: Channel Four Television Corporation, County Hall Arts, Number 9 Films Living Limited
a Wooley/Karlsen, Number 9 *film*
in co-production with: Filmgate Films, Film i Väst
Presented by: Film4, County Hall Arts
In association with: LipSync, Rocket Science, Kurosawa Production Co
Executive Producers: Norman Merry, Peter Hampden, Sean Wheelan, Thorsten Schumacher, Emma Berkofsky, Ko Kurosawa, Ollie Madden, Daniel Battsek, Kazuo Ishiguro, Nik Powell, Kenzo Okamoto, Ian Prior
Produced by: Stephen Woolley, Elizabeth Karlsen
Co-producer: Jane Hooks
Production Accountants: Eddie Kane, Eddie Franklin
Post-production Supervisor: Polly Duval
Script Supervisor: Liz West
Casting Director: Kahleen Crawford
Written by: Kazuo Ishiguro
Based on Akira Kurosawa's film Ikiru written by: Akira Kurosawa, Shinobu Hashimoto, Hideo Oguni
Director of Photography: Jamie D. Ramsay
2nd Unit Director of Photography: Tom Hole
Visual Effects: Filmgate AB
Special Effects Supervisor: Steve Bowman
Editor: Chris Wyatt
Production Designer: Helen Scott
Art Director: Andrea Stern
Set Decorator: Sarah Kane
Costume Designer: Sandy Powell
Hair and Make-up Designer: Nadia Stacey
Titles by: LipSync Design
Colour by: Company 3
Music: Emilie Levienaise-Farrouch
Music Supervisor: Rupert Hollier
Production Sound Mixer: Dylan Voigt
Unit Publicity: Freud Communications

Cast

Bill Nighy (*Williams*)
Aimee Lou Wood (*Margaret Harris*)
Alex Sharp (*Peter Wakeling*)
Tom Burke (*Sutherland*)
Adrian Rawlins (*Middleton*)
Oliver Chris (*Hart*)
Hubert Burton (*Rusbridger*)
Zoe Boyle (*Mrs McMasters*)
Barney Fishwick (*Michael*)
Patsy Ferran (*Fiona*)
Michael Cochrane (*Sir James*)
Lia Williams (*Mrs Smith*)
Anant Varman (*Singh*)
Jessica Flood (*Mrs Porter*)
Jamie Wilkes (*Talbot*)
Richard Cunningham (*Harvey*)
John Mackay (*Jones*)
Ffion Jolly (*Mrs Button*)
Celeste Dodwell (*Mrs Matthews*)
Jonathan Keeble (*Dr Matthews*)
Eunice Roberts (*Miss Fry*)
Mark James (*young Michael*)
Edward Wolstenholme (*colleague*)
Nichola McAuliffe (*Mrs Blake*)
Laurie Denman (*piano man*)
Gleanne Purcell-Brown (*barwoman*)
Violeta Valverde (*striptease artist*)
Michael James (*Fortnum's waiter*)
Rosie Sansom (*Mrs Johnstone*)
Matilda Ziegler (*prim lady*)
Grant Gillespie (*Lyons head waiter*)
Robin Sebastian (*distinguished gentleman 1*)
David Summer (*distinguished gentleman 2*)
Nicky Goldie (*landlady*)
Thomas Coombes (*police constable*)

UK 2022© 102 mins

Courtesy of Lionsgate

NEW RELEASES

Decision to Leave (Heojil Kyolshim)

From Mon 17 Oct

Triangle of Sadness

From Fri 28 Oct

The Greenaway Alphabet

From Fri 11 Nov

Aftersun

From Fri 18 Nov

What Do We See When We Look at the Sky?

(**Ras vkhedavt, rodesac cas vukurebt?**)

From Fri 25 Nov

RE-RELEASES

The Others

From Mon 17 Oct

Poltergeist

From Fri 21 Oct

Nil by Mouth

From Fri 4 Nov (Preview on Thu 20 Oct 20:20; extended intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large on Fri 4 Nov 17:50; intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI Archive on Mon 7 Nov 18:00)

The Draughtsman's Contract

From Fri 11 Nov (+ intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI National Archive on Fri 11 Nov 17:50)

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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