



# SKELETONS

Autumn  
Season  
2010

## Review by Owen van Spall, Eye For Film:

*Skeletons* is a genuine curiosity in British cinema this year - a film defying easy classification. The action centres on the activities of Davis and Bennett, a kind of Laurel and Hardy duo who work for the Veridical Company - a firm that specialises in the clean-up of psychic phenomena from the houses of middle England. Like a pair of travelling cheaply-suited Ghostbusters, Davis and Bennett get their weekly orders from the enigmatic and gruff Colonel and then shuffle off across the rural English landscape, going from house to house flushing out peoples' skeletons from their closets.

The 'procedure' which Davis and Bennett use is kept suitably vague, but basically their skill is psychic channelling - they can enter the sea of people's memories, digging through their past, moving through these recollections as if they were really there. Access points for these memories always emerge, with full pun intended, in the closets of their clients' houses (after a bit of prodding from various gizmos). After tackling the closets, the duo then present the results to the clients in a very British bureaucratic patter, allowing them to put their relationships on a 'clean slate' footing (although as one funny scene showing the pair at work demonstrates, most of their clients quickly come to regret signing up when their secrets are out on the table)

This is all very beguiling at first, but things get more confusing when the Colonel gives the pair their most make-or-break assignment yet. They are ordered to the house of Jane, a housewife whose husband disappeared years ago, leaving her to obsessively dig holes in her garden looking for him, while her two children Jojo and Rebecca look on in despair. But when solving this case continuously defies their channelling methods, Davis and Bennett find all their assumptions about what they do stretched to breaking point.

The labels 'low-budget', 'lo-fi sci-fi' and 'black comedy' could easily apply to *Skeletons*. But just because the film can be labelled in so many ways in no way detracts from its core strengths. This is actually an intriguing, well-acted, quietly funny film that, though it is outright weird most of the time and certainly won't be to everyone's taste, has a quirky charm and emotional heart all its own.

The duo of Davis and Bennett become surprisingly endearing as they shuffle about in their scruffy attire, bickering and bantering as they go through their individual emotional journeys. The camerawork and use of location deserves note for the unique atmosphere created - the film seems to be set in an ambiguous time and place in rural England, where characters travel about in old trains, ramble through empty fields and down small forest paths. The supernatural aspects of the film are admittedly low-tech with zero CGI frills, but these facets of the film serve the story, not the other way around.



## Review by Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian:

We might just have found our own Charlie Kaufman in Nick Whitfield, a former actor and stage dramatist whose feature-film debut, *Skeletons*, won the Michael Powell award at the Edinburgh film festival this year. It's intensely and pungently English, eccentric, strangely heartfelt, and very funny: a film I watched to the incessant accompaniment of my own giggling. Newcomers Ed Gaughan and Andrew Buckley play Davis and Bennett, two hassled functionaries in ill-fitting black suits. They are the representatives of a shadowy company that specialises in exhuming difficult and painful memories, inaccessible to every other kind of therapy, lancing existential boils and dragging out metaphorical skeletons, by pointing their strange bleeping equipment at bedroom closets - this being, predictably, the place where occult energies are at their strongest.

But Davis has a secret of his own. He has been "glow chasing", using the equipment to delve into his own painful memories, a practice forbidden by the company - like a drug dealer getting high on his own supply. Stealing the scene is Jason Isaacs, as the Colonel, the two men's gruff employer, sporting a cap, a 'tache of hostile dimensions, and a worrying scar across his throat. He has the disconcerting habit of addressing his subordinates as "mush" (rhymes with "push"), a mannerism I haven't heard for a couple of decades and which made me laugh every time he said it. The Colonel has promised his boys a promotion, work with the grandest names in society: "I've got a couple of Saxe-Coburgs next week: imagine the *filth!*"

Balancing oddity and fantasy with real emotions and pain is a difficult trick to pull off. Whitfield has managed it nicely. The critical tradition, incidentally, when two shadowy figures turn up arguing among themselves, is to compare the proceedings to Harold Pinter, but Davis and Bennett are probably closer to Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant. *Skeletons* is also a film that could be shown in a double-bill with Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Afterlife*. The humour is as dry as a bone.