Film

Mike Hale

The premise of "GETTING HOME," a gently mordant comedy from the Chinese director Zhang Yang, is halfway between "As I Lay Dying" and "Weekend at Bernie's": a migrant worker tries to keep a promise to a friend by lugging the friend's corpse hundreds of miles across the countryside so it can be given a proper burial in his home village. The picaresque tale, which won a jury award at the 2007 Berlin International Film Festival, combines the social commentary almost inevitable in a contemporary Chinese film — the pair's reverse migration carries them from the industrial megalopolis of Shenzhen to a soon-to-be-submerged hamlet near the Three Gorges Dam — with a canny Western-style whimsicality. The protagonist, Zhao (Zhao Benshan), faces robbery and humiliation with the same stunned surprise that he welcomes kindness and the possibility of love; he presents his dead friend, Liu (Hong Qiwen, in a brave, silent performance), as a drunk, a vegetable, a blind beggar and a scarecrow while he tries to trick or cajole a ride, a meal or a few yuan out of the people he encounters along the way.

Mr. Zhang, whose previous films include "Shower," "Quitting" and "Sunflower," based "Getting Home" on a true story that divided Chinese opinion: was the worker a hero or a disturbing symbol of a polarized culture? In the film, which is part of the Museum of Modern Art's Global Lens series, he's both hero and symbol, and no one seems disturbed by either possibility. Thursday at 6 p.m. and Jan. 24 at 4:30 p.m., Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters, (212) 708-9400, moma.org; $10.