



Aristocrats

あのこは貴族

2021/124min/Colour/English Subtitles

Distributor: Colorbird Inc.

Director: SODE Yukiko

Cast: KADOWAKI Mugi, MIZUHARA Kiko, KORA Kengo

Exeter Phoenix screening information:

Wed 2 Mar	Kiba: The Fangs of Fiction	6.00 pm
Wed 9 Mar	Ora, Ora Be Goin' Alone	7.00 pm
Wed 16 Mar	Life: Untitled	6.00 pm
Sun 20 Mar	Aristocrats	3.00 pm
Wed 23 Mar	Iwane: Sword of Serenity	8.00 pm
Wed 30 Mar	The House of the Lost on the Cape	8.00 pm

Hanako (KADOWAKI Mugi) is the third daughter in a well-to-do Tokyo medical family, who comes under intense pressure to find a husband after she is dumped by her fiancé on New Year's Eve. Both her sisters are already married, and at 27 her potential to marry into a wealthy elite Tokyo family is declining. So, she agrees to a series of disastrous arranged meetings, or *miai*, with apparently eligible men, who turn out to be complete duds. She's beginning to feel like she has to accept second best when she meets Koichiro (KORA Kengo), on a blind date at a secluded restaurant in the teeming rain. Koichiro is a handsome young lawyer and son of a wealthy family of politicians. He's clearly a 'catch' for privileged Hanako and knows exactly how to play her shy naivety.

Miki (MIZUHARA Kiko) is from a modest provincial family who studies hard to come to Tokyo to attend prestigious Keio University. She lacks money and friends, and is drawn towards the *naibusei*, or in-crowd of sons and daughters of the wealthy and powerful, even as she is constantly reminded that she is *gaibusei*, an outsider. Her father is a deadbeat, while her mother is overwhelmed and wants her to return home to help out. She meets Koichiro, who at the time is also a student at Keio, when he demands she hand over her lecture notes so he can copy them.

Thus, director SODE Yukiko sets up the inevitability of Hanako and Miki's eventual meeting over their shared interest in Koichiro. It is the women's contrasting origins which provides the underlying tension for driving the plot forward against the background of geography, class, and gender in 21st century Tokyo.

Aristocrats is an adaptation of the novel *Anoko wa kizoku*, by YAMAUCHI Mariko, and published in 2016 by *Shueisha*. It tells the story of two women from different backgrounds, who find themselves negotiating the complex intersections of life in contemporary Tokyo. This is SODE's fourth film as Director, with *Mime Mime* being her debut in 2008. *Aristocrats* is arranged as a series of chapters, featuring different people, events, and perspectives gradually coalescing around the stories of Hanako, Miki, and Koichiro.

The Japanese often like to present a harmonious, relatively egalitarian, meritocratic, and even homogeneous society – to the outside world especially, as well as to each other. Indeed, Japan does appear not to be riven by the kinds of divisions that presently consume the Anglophone world. Grownup Japanese – *shakaijin* – are supposed to park their individual identities and preferences at the door of 'society' and subsume themselves like chameleons into their ascribed roles in their various settings – the family, the school or university, or the workplace. This produces, superficially, a relatively conflict free society. Indeed, interpersonal

Dates & Venues:

4 – 13 February
ICA, London

5 – 22 February
Phoenix, Leicester

5 February – 26 March
Firstsite, Colchester

6 – 27 February
Eden Court, Inverness

6 – 27 February
Watershed, Bristol

8 – 23 February
Depot, Lewes

9 – 27 February
Storyhouse, Chester

12 February – 1 March
Cambridge Film Trust, Cambridge

13 February – 2 March
Aberystwyth Arts Centre

13 February – 27 March
Hyde Park Picture House, Leeds

13 February – 27 March
Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff

15 February – 3 March
HOME, Manchester

16 February – 16 March
Brewery Arts Cinema, Kendal

21 February – 31 March
Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle

26 February – 20 March
Queen's Film Theatre, Belfast

28 February – 28 March

Macrobert Arts Centre, Stirling

1 – 30 March
Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry

2 – 15 March
Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee

2 – 30 March
Exeter Phoenix, Exeter

4 – 6 March
QUAD, Derby

7 – 28 March
Cinema City, Norwich

7 – 28 March
City Screen Picturehouse, York

8 – 31 March
Showroom Cinema, Sheffield

12 – 20 March
Belmont Filmhouse, Aberdeen

15 – 29 March
Plymouth Arts Cinema, Plymouth

18 – 24 March
Broadway, Nottingham

18 – 24 March
Filmhouse, Edinburgh

violence, for example, is extremely rare and women in particular can celebrate feeling safe walking alone in big cities at night. However, it is the pressure not to disturb this harmonious exterior which can then be weaponised to keep others behaving in line with expectations.

The society that gradually emerges from *Aristocrats* is of a city riven by some rather deep cleavages, and it is the intersections of these cleavages which SODE brilliantly explores and exposes via the excruciatingly elegant self-control by which the politics of personal relationships is conducted in Japanese elite society. The film's pace and tone mirror the austere restraint of the protagonists as they negotiate their lives between duty and desire. The recursive circularity of gender is, of course, immediately on show as men work, and women treat finding and keeping a husband as their full-time career.

Marriage among Japanese elites is less about love than class, and protecting familial status, as it is in many other places. At every turning Hanako and Miki confront the problem of whether one is an insider or outsider. In Tokyo, the ultimate outsider is someone who recently migrated from the provinces. We are reminded frequently that Hanako comes from Shoto, a secluded upscale neighbourhood located behind Shibuya, described by her friend as 'a part of Tokyo where it's hard for outsiders to move into'. She goes on to explain, 'People who come to Tokyo to make it are different from us. Tokyo's compartmentalized (*sumi-wake-sareteiru*). You only meet people from your own class'.

When Miki returns home for the new year, she confronts the reality of what she had abandoned for a life in the world's largest and most exciting metropolis: empty and abandoned streets, a car obsessed brother with no future, a deadbeat dad, and a struggling mother. The unipolar gravitational power of Tokyo is so strong that even as the country as a whole depopulates, Tokyo continues to grow, which means that everywhere else has to shrink. At 37 million people the Tokyo area represents one third of the entirety of Japan. Small wonder that provincial women, who in general face few opportunities in their hometowns, seek another life for themselves. For people like Miki, however, life in Tokyo may not end up being any better, with friend Itsuko exclaiming that 'Country girls come here and get exploited. It's like Tokyo feeds on us.'

Aristocrats slowly, subtly, carefully, gradually destroys the illusion of a homogeneous, unified, middle classed and meritocratic society, by asking who are Japan's real aristocrats – the insiders? Where and how do they live their lives and ensure their own reproduction? In so doing the film naturally asks who are not the aristocrats? Where do they come from and how do they live their lives in Tokyo as outsiders? *Aristocrats* shows us how parallel lives unfold within the same city, permanently divided by the geographies of class, gender, family, and work, intersecting only when transgression breaks the superficial harmony of inherited social relations.

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