

FILM / REVIEWS

‘Aristocrats’: Power performances capture the world of Japan’s elite

映画『あのこは貴族』 予告編



BY MARK SCHILLING
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Feb 25, 2021

In the boom years of the 1980s, most Japanese — the often-quoted figure was 90% — identified as middle class. Meanwhile, Japan’s prewar aristocracy had seemingly vanished from the face of the Earth.

Today, as Yukiko Sode’s “Aristocrats” shows with precision and insight, the Japanese upper class continues to rule the top rungs of business, politics and society, its byways only dimly glimpsed by those below.

Based on a Mariko Yamauchi novel of the same name, “Aristocrats” is the rare recent Japanese film that focuses on the yawning gap between the masses and the classes — that is, the folks from privileged backgrounds who hop on the escalator to a top-flight university in kindergarten and, if they are women, need not bother with anything as vulgar as a career.

ARISTOCRATS (ANO KO WA KIZOKU)

One such is Hanako Haibara (Mugi Kadowaki), the sheltered daughter of a well-off doctor. As the film begins, she has just broken up with her fiance and launches a frantic search for a replacement. At the advanced age of 27, she is ready to settle

Rating



Run

124 mins.

Time

Language

Japanese

down just as many women in her elite circle have done before her. But a series of laughably disastrous encounters with the wrong sort of men gets her nowhere.

Then she meets Koichiro Aoki (Kengo Kora), the gentlemanly scion of an impeccably upper-crust family. “They’re a class above us,” her level-headed violinist friend Itsuko (Shizuka Ishibashi) warns her, but Hanako is already head over heels. And Koichiro is smitten with her. A proposal soon follows.

Hanako learns, however, that her betrothed has also been seeing Miki Tokioka (Kiko Mizuhara), a former classmate from his posh college. What gives?

“Aristocrats” isn’t a cliched worlds-collide sort of comedy. Instead, we get the same sensitive and layered portrayal of Miki as we do of Hanako. Though smart and determined, this ladder-climber from the countryside has had none of Hanako’s financial or societal advantages. Instead, she has had to fight her way up, starting as a club hostess and eventually becoming an event planner.

When the two women meet, the claws never come out. Instead, Hanako admires Miki’s self-confidence, as well as a joie de vivre missing from her own padded existence.

As Hanako, Kadowaki nails the demure, effortlessly refined manner of well-born Japanese women. It’s as though she prepped for the role by watching videos of imperial family members performing their official duties, with flawless manners that are taught from the cradle.

Meanwhile, Mizuhara, an American-Japanese model and actor, gives the performance of her career as Miki, a woman who is both tough and vulnerable, stylish (when Mizuhara-the-supermodel fleetingly appears) and down-to-earth. Often called on by male directors to be sexy and a touch exotic, Mizuhara plays a wider range of moods and emotions for Sode, with an appealing freshness and verve.

Finally, Kora dials down his usual intensity to better reflect Koichiro’s emptiness. Unlike the two women in his life, who have inner lives, he is totally a creature of his class, his family and his own ambitions.

That said, he exudes the charisma of an uncrowned prince, born to power and wealth. For some woman he will be quite the catch, if she doesn’t mind living like a captive goldfish in his crystal glass bowl.

In a time of both misinformation and too much information,
quality journalism is more crucial than ever.
By subscribing, you can help us get the story right.

SUBSCRIBE (/subscribe/?
utm_source=jto&utm_medium=general-
box&utm_campaign=sub)
NOW