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Reviews

'Aristocrats' Review: Japan Cuts at Japan Society – An Engaging Portrait of Two Women

By **Abe Friedtanzer** August 25, 2021



Love is hard enough to find without added pressure from family members and society. Everyone's circumstances are at least somewhat different, yet there's an expectation that exists in every culture, varied as it may be, of when and how people should couple up and start a family. There are any number of factors that can delay that journey or set

it off course altogether, not least of which is a lack of desire to conform and do what others believe is right. **Aristocrats** offers an entertaining picture of an eagerness to fit in mixed with a spirit of individuality where only one sentiment can truly emerge victorious.

Aristocrats follows two women from remarkably different backgrounds whose lives converge as they search for love. Hanako (Mugi Kadowaki) lives in Tokyo and is set up almost nightly with a new man who might make a suitable husband, or who, according to some, might rescue her from an undesirable fate regardless of their actual suitability. Miki (Kiko Mizuhara) comes from outside the city and works as an event planner following an untenable and unaffordable effort at university. Hanako and Miki's unlikely meeting arises as a result of their connection with Koichiro (Kengo Kora), a charming man from a powerful family.



Mugi Kadowaki as Hanako

This film, which is based on the novel by Mariko Yamauchi, is divided into chapters, first introducing Hanako and her lifestyle, surrounded constantly by others who think they know what's best for her and only occasionally bother to ask for her perspective, and then later bringing in Miki, who travels through the world much more independently but without that often comforting influence of others who believe they know better and in some instances actually might be helpful. It's enlightening to understand who they are before they are thrown curveballs and forced to decide whether they will finally take charge of their own fates.

This is a firmly female-driven story, helmed by Yukiko Sode and offering a showcase of the women who are typically ignored and assumed to be uninterested in having a say in their lives. That's evident from the string of awkward dates that Hanako goes on at the beginning of the film, which rarely involve the man actually asking her what she wants or what she likes. Koichiro represents something different, waiting to order a drink until he has established that Hanako too drinks. That act of seeing her and acknowledging her is a remarkable step, one that only adds to the allure of this potentially perfect man.



Kengo Kora as Koichiro

Yet, as with all cinematic romances, and many in real life, there is no such thing as a perfect man or a perfect match, and that is part of what makes this film so entertaining. As Hanako becomes closer and more taken with Koichiro, she hears rumors of his political family whose industry he might eventually join, and by the time she meets Miki, it is clear that there is much more to him that was not apparent throughout any of their meetings. Koichiro remains shrouded in mystery, and the film wisely chooses not to focus on him but rather to stick with the two women in his life and the bond that they come to share.

Kadowaki and Mizuhara turn in warm, enticing performances that dig into the intricacies of their characters and how their self-presentations have been shaped by the way that people have seen them throughout their lives. Segmenting the film into chapters allows each to come into her own separately and then to present an inviting union of the two storylines. Kora plays his part well, drawing in audiences just enough to make them question whether they should truly like him. This film serves as a thought-provoking commentary on social conventions and an engaging story in its own right.

Grade: B+

Aristocrats makes its [New York Premiere at JAPAN CUTS: Festival of New Japanese Film](#).