ARTS

The film 'Rules of Living' has plenty to say about life in Tokyo

International production in Japan shows subtitles no longer a barrier



In "Rules of Living," Greg Dale, left, plays Vincent, an American backpacker turned English teacher in Tokyo, opposite Kaho Minami as Mikuko, his landlady and student. (Courtesy of Hiromu Takeuchi)

KAORI SHOJI
October 8, 2025 08:00 JST

TOKYO -- Foreign film crews are an increasingly common sight in Tokyo. Interest in filming in the city is soaring, spurred in part by the success of productions such as the "Tokyo Vice" series (2022-24). But while the creative and financial potential of setting a story in Tokyo is clear, the logistics can be daunting.

Another recent release shows what is possible. "Rules of Living," which opened in Tokyo on Sept. 19, may well become the gold standard for independent films made and performed by Western expatriates. The film recently won the best narrative feature award at the Twelve Lions Film Festival in the U.S. state of Kentucky and has already been shown at several other international film festivals.

"Rules" was written and directed by former off-Broadway actor Greg Dale, who has worked in Japanese media for three decades. The cast brings together longtime foreign residents and Japanese stars including Kaho Minami, Kippei Shiina and Sumire. Behind the scenes, most of the producers are Western, assisted by Japanese subtitle writers and cultural consultants.

Executive producer Kenneth Pechter says the project took more than 20 years from conception to release -- from assembling a team to raising funds for production, postproduction and theatrical distribution.

A longtime Tokyo resident, Pechter is also a business and entertainment industry consultant and dean of Hosei University's Business School of Innovation Management. "Fifteen years ago, when Greg first decided to make 'Rules,' there was no infrastructure within the industry or a market outside Japan for non-Japanese, dual-language films with Western actors," he says.

Producer Jeffrey Rowe, a Canadian expat who also makes a cameo appearance in "Rules" as Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), a Greek Irish Japanophile and writer, says the ground shifted in 2020. "The pandemic happened, 'Parasite' (a hit South Korean film released in 2019) came out on Netflix, and the American audience discovered the joy of reading subtitles and understanding foreign films. We thought, this is our chance."



Executive producer Kenneth Pechter, left, and actor/producer Jeffrey Rowe. (Photo by of Kaori Shoji)

Rowe, who had previously collaborated with Pechter on a 2014 film called "Pancakes," thought that "Rules" had the makings of a significant success. "I was pretty sure that Japanese females over 25 and foreigners in Japan would love this film," he says.

"Rules" is a quiet, clever romantic comedy about two middle-aged people from very different cultural backgrounds. Dale plays an American backpacker named Vincent and Minami plays Tokyo office worker Mikuko.

Vincent has arrived in Tokyo on the last leg of a soul-searching journey through Asia, inspired by the writings of Hearn, who settled in Japan in 1890 and became known as Koizumi Yakumo, becoming a prominent member of the Japanese literati.

On his travels, Vincent has met Mikuko's daughter, who suggested he should contact her mother because "she has a big house in Tokyo and lives there all alone." Vincent's plan is to become Mikuko's housemate, explore her neighborhood and try to reenact, if not relive, the experiences of Hearn -- such as watching fireflies in a forest at night or pondering the transient beauty of dewdrops.

But when Vincent turns up on Mikuko's doorstep, she freaks out: She cannot speak English, she has an ultraconservative boyfriend, and her elderly mother is in the hospital. There is no space in her life to accommodate a foreigner and his potentially questionable hygiene. And Hearn or no Hearn, she is not going to share a bathroom with this strange man.



Mikuko shares a light moment with her longtime boyfriend, Koichi, played by Kippei Shiina. (Courtesy of Kenta Hirama)

But Mikuko relents, enticed by the 100,000 yen ($677) per month that Vincent promises to pay her for accommodation. More importantly, she has a secret wish to learn English and become the kind of independent, extroverted woman who does not give a hoot what other people think -- just like her daughter, played by Sumire, who left her mother stranded in Tokyo to deal with house chores and eldercare while she took off to "live my own life."

Mikuko then does what any self-respecting Japanese woman would do: She tacks a piece of paper to the wall titled "Rule of Living," which Vincent cannot resist correcting with a red pen to "Rule(s) of Living." Among other items, she stipulates that Vincent must go to the nearest public bathhouse instead of showering at home.

Not nice of her? Then I'm here to tell you that more than a few Japanese women balk at the thought of sharing bathrooms with their spouses. Sons, yes. Husbands, no. "Rules" clearly knows where the heart of a Japanese woman lies -- in the bathroom, which must be in a separate compartment from the toilet. Toilets, by the way, are a whole other subject, which Wim Wenders touched upon in "Perfect Days " (2023) -- another great Tokyo film by a Western filmmaker.

Despite the bathroom debacle, Vincent and Mikuko eventually realize that they belong together. Appropriately for a film made in Japan, however, the film displays minimal intimacy, and the emotional payoff is as restrained and orderly as a haiku poem.

Pechter and Rowe both say that a big part of what drew them to "Rules" was the depiction of Tokyo. Mikuko lives on the fringe of the inner city in a location that is leafy and dotted with old shops. The owners of a neighborhood greengrocery start taking English lessons from Vincent, and in the process Mikuko discovers their names, which she had not bothered to learn before Vincent came into her life.



In addition to producing the movie, Rowe -- a Canadian expat -- makes a cameo as Japanophile and writer Lafcadio Hearn. (Courtesy of Satoshi Mizusu)

So is Vincent a white knight who rescues a repressed and sad Japanese woman? After all, this is an all-too common thread in the Westerner-in-Japan narrative. But Pechter says: "No, it's a story of two people who find themselves -- individually. They both trigger changes in the other, but these two are on equal footing."

That could echo the life of Hearn, who was abandoned by his parents at a young age and by many accounts was disillusioned with life in the West -- he lived for several years in the U.S. before becoming an English teacher in Matsue, in Japan's Shimane prefecture. There, he married a local woman named Setsuko, liberating her from tradition and patriarchy. She became Hearn's cultural consultant and editor as well as his wife.

By a happy coincidence, Hearn is having his own moment of revival. A new drama series based on the lives of Hearn and Setsuko is out on NHK, a Japanese public broadcaster. Both Pechter and Rowe hope that interest in the Hearn drama will boost box office takings for "Rules."

In the end, though, Rowe and Pechter agree that "Rules" boils down to life in Tokyo. "As expats we learned who we are in Tokyo," says Rowe. "We want Tokyoites to be proud of their city like New Yorkers and Londoners, and to have the films coming out of Tokyo to reflect that."

For a native Tokyoite, that is a gratifying take on what we call home. But maybe we need someone like Vincent to show us the city's charms. Like Mikuko, many of us are blind to the good stuff right in front of us.

Kaori Shoji is a contributing writer.