

TOHO & KNOCKONWOOD

PRESENT



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2025 OFFICIAL SELECTION
CANNES PREMIERE

LOVE ON TRIAL

a film by KOJI FUKADA

2025 – JAPAN – DRAMA – JAPANESE – 124'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Mai, a rising J-Pop idol, is finally about to have her big break when she unexpectedly falls in love. But in a treacherous industry where young singers must maintain an image of flawless purity, love is forbidden. When her relationship is exposed, Mai's agency takes drastic action, dragging the couple to court over the "no love" clause in her contract, throwing her life into chaos.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

In recent years in Japan, there have been several cases in which a girl who was an active Idol was sued for damages by her management company for violating the “no relationship” contract, and in one case, the court ordered the defendant girl to pay several hundred thousand yen in damages. The Court and the Judge ruled that “It is an Idol's job to increase the number of her fans and the No-Relationship Agreement is a legitimate way of preserving the actress's pure image.”

When I heard this news, I had many questions about the paradoxes inherent in the whole system.

In Japan's male dominated society, it seemed that people accepted that the creation of a beautiful young girl as a sexual commodity for men was absolutely fine, and that in order to do this it was perfectly natural to ignore a basic and fundamental human freedom, the right to love who you want.

People talked a lot about the need to preserve the “purity” of Idols and the judge even mentioned this in his ruling, but few people commented on the fact that this idea of the Virginal Girl (as a kind of fetishistic sex object) was a male fantasy and that male pop stars are not expected to act like virgins.

This idea of the purity and virginity of Idols exposes the long reach of male power (and the underlying violence of that power) in Japanese society.

After my initial angry reaction to the logical inconsistency and moral hypocrisy of the case I began to think about the two young people themselves. The girl had dreamed of being an Idol and now was being punished by the male society that had created her dream and criticized by the public and the media. I was also interested in the way her boyfriend too was pilloried by the media.

What were the two of them thinking while they were on trial? I thought that the trial involved them fighting the society around them but must have also made a process of re-examining their own position.

Through the portrayal of the young lovers in this film, the film shows the loneliness and the challenges people face if they dare to stand up and fight for their lives against a twisted social system that is determined to mock them and break them. I wanted to depict how their love starts and ends as honestly as possible.

I wanted the film to reveal the huge gender disparities in Japanese society and the injustices of a male-dominated societies. The #MeToo movement in America and Europe has revealed how much this is a universal problem. Although the film is about Japanese Idol Culture, which has many unique features, I believe it will resonate in many other parts of the world.

Koji FUKADA

INTERVIEW WITH KOJI FUKADA

Once you decided upon the story of *Love on Trial*, can you tell us about the experience of writing the screenplay?

The idea for *Love on Trial* came to me around 2015. At that time, I came across a small article on the internet about a female Idol who had been sued for damages by her agency after having a romantic relationship with a fan. That strong sense of discomfort I felt upon reading it was the starting point for this film. My unease likely stemmed from the fact that I hadn't been very familiar with Idol culture up until that point. Precisely because of that, I felt it was crucial to learn about Idol culture and the lives of those within it. To write the screenplay, I conducted interviews with actual Idols and producers who manage Idols, which helped me deepen my understanding of this world.

***Love on Trial* talks about gender disparity - why were you attracted to this theme?**

Living in Japan, where the country consistently ranks below 100th in the Global Gender Gap Index and remains overwhelmingly the lowest among G7 nations, it's impossible not to think about gender disparity. The film industry, too, has a low employment rate for women and is a male-dominated world. In the entertainment industry, I've repeatedly observed how female actors, talents, and idols are often held to standards of sexual purity and morality. When they deviate from these expectations, they can face severe backlash. When turning the camera toward Japanese society (and perhaps this isn't limited to Japan), gender disparity inevitably becomes a motif that "appears," whether I intend it to or not.

The film features a wonderful central performance from Kyoko Saito. What was the casting process like for the role of Mai, and what qualities were you looking for in the actress?

The gestures and behaviors of Idols are part of a unique culture cultivated over many years between idols and their fans, and it's not easy for an actor to convincingly portray "Idol-like" qualities. For this reason, I wanted to cast a real Idol for the lead role of Mai Yamaoka from the very beginning.

However, since this project critically examines the Idol industry, many Idol production companies declined our invitation to audition. I was on the verge of giving up and considering casting an actor instead when, in the spring of 2024, I happened to come across an article about Kyoko Saito, who had just "graduated" from a popular Idol group. I immediately reached out to her and invited her to audition.

Despite the significant risks involved in taking on such a challenging role, Saito demonstrated a strong commitment to the part during the audition. We were so impressed by her performance that we decided to offer her the role on the spot.

For this project, there was no doubt that Saito's experience as an Idol would add credibility, which was a major appeal. However, what truly captivated me was the emotional depth and intensity of her gaze during the courtroom scene she performed at the audition.

There is something superficial about the relationship between Happy Fanfare and their fans. Does this relationship between fans and idols tell us something about the nature of celebrity culture around the world today?

It is difficult to doubt the sincerity of the passion that Idol fans have for their Idols. This is sometimes referred to as “pseudo-romance.” While it is true that such aspects cannot be denied, the question of how much of the “love” that arises in a person's heart is real and how much is fake is something that cannot be understood by others, and ultimately, it is something that even the person themselves cannot fully comprehend.

The real issue lies in the “desire of the management,” which constantly seeks to exploit, encourage, and commodify that “romantic” attachment as a business in order to generate continuous profit.

This phenomenon might fundamentally align with the unsettling superficiality of celebrity culture in capitalist societies, where fame is directly tied to financial gain.

Mai falls in love with a magician and mime artist. What made you choose this profession for the character?

I wanted to contrast Idols who are produced by an agency and find it difficult to assert their independence, with street performers who produce themselves and are not bound by anyone. Mai is drawn to Kei, who lives a life she cannot imagine for herself. Additionally, I found it interesting to contrast the way Idols, who are part of a massive revenue system, handle money, with the way street performers rely on tips from the audience in front of them.

Another personal reason is that I love films like Chaplin, Fellini, and Pierre Etaix that use street performance as their subject matter. Street performance itself feels fantastical and cinematic.

The editing of the film is very impressive. In the first half of the film, Mai is the centre of attention and yet by the court scenes she feels alone - how did you decide on the structure of the film?

The structural aim of this film was to collide the glittering, pop world of idols with the sterile, linear world of the courtroom within a single movie. Mai, who once lived in the glittering world, becomes separated from it and finds herself in the courtroom. On the other hand, it is also the story of Mai, who had her autonomy stripped away under the guise of protection, gaining independence and regaining her self-discovery and ultimately confronting her own loneliness.

Your films often show detailed portraits of relationships - in what way does *Love on Trial* follow on from your previous work?

Expression is always influenced by the unconscious mind of the creator, so it is very difficult for me to answer this question objectively. In fact, I would love for the audience to tell me what common thread they see across my work. If I had to say, I hope that my films are not a means of conveying a message, but rather a mirror that stimulates the imagination of the audience, allowing them to rediscover their own position and worldview. To achieve this, I strive to depict human beings from a detached, third-person perspective and present them to the audience. This approach remains constant.

***Love on Trial* has a uniquely Japanese setting, but the themes of fame and autonomy are universal. Can you tell us about how you managed this balance?**

Idol culture is certainly intriguing and novel, which can tempt one to focus on capturing every detail of it. However, if I had done so, the film could have ended up feeling like a guided tour of an exotic world, so I held back. I kept detailed explanations to an absolute minimum and focused as much as possible on universal human conflicts like love and loneliness, which exist in any world. I also think that “Idol romance” is a story of love and separation that is extremely classical, like *Romeo and Juliet*.

ABOUT KOJI FUKADA

Koji Fukada was born in 1980 in Tokyo. He attended Faculty of Literature at Taisho University and began taking classes in filmmaking at the same time at Film School of Tokyo in 1999.

After making his first feature film *The Chair*, he joined the Seinendan theatrical company headed by Oriza Hirata in 2005. Fukada made *Hospitalité (Kantai)* in 2010 and *Au revoir l'été (Hotori no Sakuko)* in 2013. His film *Harmonium* won the Jury Award in the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes 2016.

In 2018, Fukada was awarded Chevalier of Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France and made *The Man from the Sea (Umi wo Kakeru)* a film shot in Indonesia.

In 2019, his feature film *A Girl Missing (Yokogao)* is selected at Locarno Film Festival.

In the same year, Fukada made a TV series *The Real Thing (Honki no Shirushi : Gekijo ban)* for the Japanese television. He edited the series into a 228 minutes feature which has received the Cannes label 2020.

In 2022, his feature *Love Life* was selected in Competition at the Venice Film Festival. His latest film, *Love on Trial* is premiering in Official Selection in Cannes.

Together with directors like Hirokazu Kore-eda and Nobuhiro Suwa he campaigns for the creation of a Japanese CNC.

FILMOGRAPHY

| | |
|------|--|
| 2025 | LOVE ON TRIAL Feature, 124' Cannes 2025, Official Selection |
| 2022 | LOVE LIFE Feature, 123' Venice 2022, Competition |
| 2020 | THE REAL THING Feature, 228' Cannes Label 2020 |
| 2019 | A GIRL MISSING (Yokogao) Feature, 111' Locarno, Competition |
| 2018 | THE MAN FROM THE SEA (Umi wo Kakeru) Feature, 107' |
| 2016 | HARMONIUM Feature, 118' Cannes 2016, Un Certain Regard, Jury Award |
| 2015 | SAYONARA Feature, 112' |
| 2013 | AU REVOIR L'ÉTÉ (Hotori no Sakuko) Feature, 125' |
| 2010 | HOSPITALITÉ (Kantai) Feature, 96' |
| 2008 | HUMAN COMEDY IN TOKYO Feature, 140' |
| 2006 | LA GRENADIÈRE Short feature, 48' |
| 2004 | HOME SWEET HOME Feature, 68' |
| 2004 | ALICE IN CAPRICES Feature |
| 2002 | THE CHAIR Feature, 95' |

CAST

Kyoko Saito

Yuki Kura

Erika Karata

Kenjiro Tsuda

CREW

| | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Written and Directed by | Koji Fukada |
| Co-writer | Shintaro Mitani |
| Music | agehasprings |
| Executive Producers | Shin Yamaguchi, Hisashi Usui |
| Producers | Yoko Abe, Akira Yamano |
| Co-producer | Atsuko Ohno |
| Cinematographer | Hidetoshi Shinomiya |
| Lighting Director | Kenta Gokan |
| Art Director | Hiroto Matsuzaki, Isao Hasegawa |
| Sound | Takaaki Yamamoto |
| Editor | Sylvie Lager |
| International Sales | mk2 Films |

INTERNATIONAL PRESS & SALES

INTERNATIONAL PRESS - CRITICAL PR

Jon Rushton jon@critical-pr.com

Hannah Farr hannah@critical-pr.com



INTERNATIONAL SALES

Fionnuala Jamison, Managing Director
fionnuala.jamison@mk2.com

Emmanuel Pissarra, Head of Acquisitions
emmanuel.pissarra@mk2.com

Quentin Bohanna, International Sales
quentin.bohanna@mk2.com

Elise Cochin, International Sales
elise.cochin@mk2.com

Anne-Laure Barbarit, Festival Manager
anne-laure.barbarit@mk2.com

Mathilde Martin, Head of Marketing
mathilde.martini@mk2.com

Lucie Cottet, Marketing
lucie.cottet@mk2.com

Visit our website www.mk2films.com