



“Rental Family” Review: Brendan Fraser Gets a Stellar Star Vehicle in Hikari’s Clever Comic Heartwarmer

The Oscar-winner plays a struggling actor living in Tokyo, who begins working for a company that provides performers for personal role-play situations.

Rental Family

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Oscar winners, especially those coming from left field, don’t always find worthy successors to their award-winning roles. But Brendan Fraser has come up with a beaut in his first starring part since *The Whale*. Playing an American actor living in Tokyo who finds a unique way to practice his craft, the actor delivers a superlative performance in *Rental Family*, a dramedy that proves a charming surprise balancing poignancy and humor with rare delicacy. Receiving its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, the movie, directed by Japanese filmmaker Hikari (*37 Seconds*), should find appreciative audiences upon its theatrical release in November.

At the story’s beginning, Philip (Fraser) is struggling to make a living after living in Tokyo for seven years. After a big toothpaste commercial, the jobs have dried up, to the point where he’s reduced to playing a tree. So he’s more than willing to accept an unspecified gig for which he’s only told by his agent that he’ll be playing a “sad American.”

It turns out that he’s attending a funeral featuring the deceased in an open casket surrounded by grieving mourners. Except it turns out that the person is very much alive, and that Philip has been hired by the “Rental Family” agency that specializes in providing actors to deliver “specialized performances” in personal role-play situations. (Apparently, this is a thing in Japan.)

Impressed by Philip’s suitably somber performance, Shinji (Takehiro Hira, *Shogun*), the agency’s owner, offers him a permanent job. “We need a token white guy,” Shinji explains. Initially reluctant, Philip eventually accepts, although he nearly gets fired when he panics during his first assignment playing the groom of a young woman who’s secretly marrying her female lover.

Rental Family cannily exploits its unusual premise to both comical and moving effect. Philip’s next assignments prove challenging because he can’t separate his feelings from his

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professional obligations. In one case, he plays a journalist pretending to interview a legendary Japanese actor (played by actual legendary Japanese actor Akira Emoto, of Dr. Akagi fame) because his daughter doesn't want him to feel forgotten. In the other, he plays the American father of an 11-year-old girl, Mia (Shannon Gorman, affecting in her film debut), whose single mother is desperate to get her enrolled in a prestigious private school. In both cases, Philip, who wears his heart on his sleeve, makes choices that get him into trouble with his clients.

Philip's tender relationship with Mia, who thinks he really is her long-absent dad, proves the story's most moving element. But *Rental Family* also wittily explores the manner in which we all role-play in our lives to varying degrees. Hikari and her co-screenwriter Stephen Blahut cleverly illustrate this with a series of narrative surprises in which relationships are revealed to be not what they initially appear, providing some of the film's most amusing moments.

Cinematographer Takuro Ishizaka makes wonderful use of Tokyo, frequently employing shots depicting its vast urban landscape to underscore the loneliness of Philip and many of its inhabitants.

Fraser, who previously exploited his toned physique to terrific comic effect in *George of the Jungle* and other early films, now uses his comparative bulk with moving results. Lumbering through Tokyo and looming over the Japanese figures with whom he comes into contact, he makes you feel his character's otherness both physically and emotionally. His superbly nuanced and expressive performance proves key to the film's power, and he's well matched by excellent supporting players, including Mari Yamamoto as one of his role-playing co-workers, with whom he develops a strong friendship (and who thankfully doesn't turn out to be a predictable love interest).

"Why do adults always lie?" Mia plaintively asks Philip at one particularly vulnerable moment. It's a question to which we can all relate, and one to which *Rental Family* provides touching and incisive answers.

By Frank Scheck, The Hollywood Reporter
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