

“Rental Family” is inspired by real-life businesses such as Nihon Kokasei Honbu (Japanese Efficiency Corporation) that enable clients to literally rent out actors to portray wedding guests, estranged parents, romantic partners, etc. (In 2019, [Werner Herzog](#) mined this material to great effect in the scripted docudrama “[Family Romance, LLC.](#)”) Brendan Fraser is Phillip Vandarploueg, a middle-aged actor who moved to Japan to star in a toothpaste commercial seven years ago, subsequently appeared in a string of second-rate productions and is now struggling to find work. We can’t help but be reminded of Bill Murray’s Bob Harris in “[Lost in Translation](#)” — but whereas Harris was on the back nine of his successful career, it’s clear that Phillip has never risen above the level of journeyman actor.

Constantly grimacing as if there’s a pebble in his shoe, his natural resting face resembling that of a sad Emoji in human form, Phillip has tried to assimilate and has become fluent in Japanese. Still, we get the distinct feeling he has stayed here because there’s no one back in America who cares if he ever returns. (In a couple of elegiac sequences, we see Phillip alone in his apartment, looking out his window and watching the full and happy lives of residents in the building across the way as if he’s taking in a television program. It’s like a sad-sack take on “Rear Window.”)

With Hikari and cinematographer Takurô Ishizaka shooting much of the story in bright daylight (in contrast to so many night-driven, neon-soaked Tokyo stories), Phillip lands a gig with a rental family business run by the brusque and efficient Shinji, played by Takehiro Hira in a strong performance that reveals surprising layers along the way.