

『ナミビアの砂漠』
DESERT OF NAMIBIA

Written and Directed by
Yoko Yamanaka

Press Kit as of May 2024



INTRODUCTION

Written & Directed by YOKO YAMANAKA
Amiko (Selected for Berlinale at the youngest age in history)

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Starring YUUMI KAWAI
An icon of the new era

At the age of 19, director Yoko Yamanaka's self-produced film *Amiko* was featured at the 39th Pia Film Festival and won the Audience Award from the PFF Awards in 2017. Subsequently, she was the youngest invitee ever to be at the Forum section of the 68th Berlin International Film Festival, followed by screenings at various international film festivals including the Hong Kong International Film Festival, the Jeonju International Film Festival, and the Fantasia International Film Festival in Canada, establishing a name for herself as a director.



When *Amiko* was screened at New York's JAPAN CUTS: Festival of New Japanese Film, Ryuichi Sakamoto, who happened to watch it, praised Yoko Yamanaka, saying, "It has the feel of lightness and humor, pain, and tempo reminiscent of the Nouvelle Vague (New Wave) films from the early 1960s. I look forward to her future work. She has the capability that attracts both men and women of all ages, with the power born through freedom."

On the other hand, Yuumi Kawai, who had vaguely aspired to become an actress, was invited by her acquaintances to watch *Amiko* during her third year of high school, and this had led her to experience the stimulation and passion that she had never encountered before. Wishing to be an actress, Yuumi directly expressed this to Director Yamanaka during a stage greeting, "I want to appear in your film someday," and after watching it for the second time, she handed over a letter stating, "I will become an actress." It is no exaggeration to say that Yoko Yamanaka and *Amiko* had changed her life. And now, looking at her thriving as an actress, and as an icon of the new era, one might argue that this fateful encounter was inevitable.

Thus, the long-awaited collaboration of these two energetic individuals from the new generation, marking Director Yamanaka's first full-length feature film and her new film in four years, is *Desert of Namibia*.

"While considering the new project for Director Yamanaka's original script, we were told that she was hoping to work with Yuumi Kawai. Although we learned of their relationship afterward, we believed that these two could surely create something interesting. The only thing we did was simply encourage them to freely create what they truly wanted to do together. The script, for which the director accumulated fragmented synopses to express what she truly wanted to show now, was completed in about a month, and then we immediately went into filming. This is a film freely created through

shared ideas and discussions by the young staff centered around cinematographer Yonekura, as well as young actors like Kawai, Kaneko, and Kanichiro.” (Producer Konishi)

”When I told Kawai that, ’The only thing that has been decided so far is that I will shoot a movie with you as the lead,’ she responded, ’If the director is you, then I am happy with anything.’ Through discussions with her, I decided to depict the truth as I saw with my own eyes without concealing myself. Even if it meant revealing parts of myself that I didn’t find favorable, I decided to make the film in that way. I enjoy seeing people experience the ups and downs of romance. Love involves hurting your partner, but ultimately also causing pain to yourself as well. It is definitely okay for anyone to make mistakes at times, especially young people. With that in mind, I created this work with the hope of creating a romantic film, especially as we are in this era. Moreover, this film is also a story about youth in chaos and conflict.” (Director Yamanaka)

With such lightheartedness in its production, *Desert of Namibia* has splendidly received an official invitation from the Directors’ Fortnight at the 77th Cannes International Film Festival, allowing it to step onto the global stage.

DIRECTOR’S MESSAGE

I am delighted that this painful, yet liberating and beloved film journey, which only we could have created at that time, is starting from the radical Directors’ Fortnight. This is remarkable! Every member of the staff and cast was brilliant! I am filled with deep gratitude and respect for everyone who has been involved and kindly watched over us. And to the overwhelming radiance from our lead, Yuumi Kawai! I filmed every cut as if it were a reward for me. I really look forward to the audience’s reaction at Cannes, who will have the privilege of seeing it a bit earlier than the rest.

SYNOPSIS

For 21-year-old Kana, thinking about the future is too boring, and she doesn’t even know what she wants in life. She lacks passion for anything, and even romance is merely just for killing time. Her boyfriend Honda, with whom she lives, tries to please Kana by paying the rent and cooking for her. However, as her relationship with the self-confident creator Hayashi deepens, Kana begins to feel burdened by Honda.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Yoko YAMANAKA

Born in 1997 in Nagano Prefecture. Dropped out of the Nihon University's College of Art. She self-taught herself and produced her directorial debut work, *Amiko*, and it won an award at the PFF Awards 2017. The following year, at the age of 20, she was invited to the 68th Berlin International Film Festival, becoming the youngest director ever invited and setting a record as the youngest feature film director at the festival. Her film has been screened in over 10 cities and countries including Hong Kong and New York. Her directorial works include "Anytime, Anywhere" which is a part of the omnibus film *21 seiki no onna no ko* (2019) produced by Ū-ki Yamato, and *Uoza-doshi* (2020) as part of the ndjc program.



ABOUT THE CAST

Yuumi KAWAI

Born in 2000, raised in Tokyo. In 2021, her performances in the films *It's a Summer Film!* and *A Balance* were highly praised, earning her honors such as the Best Newcomer Award at the 43rd Yokohama Film Festival, the Best New Actor Award at the 35th Takasaki Film Festival, the New Actress Award at the 95th Kinema Junpo Best Ten Awards, and the Newcomer Award at the 64th Blue Ribbon Awards. In 2022, she appeared in numerous noteworthy films such as *Just Remembering*, *Love Nonetheless*, *To Be Killed by a High School Girl*, *Fuyu Soubi*, *Plan 75*, *A Hundred Flowers*, *The Lines That Define Me*, and *A Man*, establishing herself as a rising star with remarkable energy.

In recent years, she has appeared in *Sayonara, Girls.* (2023), *In Her Room* (2023), *April Come She Will* (2024), and on TV dramas such as *Extremely Inappropriate!* (2024/TBS) and *RoOT* (2024/TX, among others). She also has upcoming releases including *A Girl Named Ann* (2024) and the anime movie *Look Back* (2024).



Daichi KANEKO

Born in 1996, raised in Hokkaido. He debuted after winning the Actor and Model Division at the "Amuse Audition Festival 2014". Since then, he has appeared in numerous films, dramas, and commercials. In 2018, he gained popularity with the drama *Ossan's Love* (EX). In 2019, he made his first leading role debut in the drama *Fujoshi, Ukkari Gei ni Kokuru* (NHK), attracting immediate attention. Some of his notable works include *Lights of Kyoto* (17), *Narratage* (17), *Family Story* (18), *He Won't Kill, She Won't Die* (19), *Colorless* (20), *Sensei, Would You Sit Beside Me?* (21), his first appearance with Yuumi Kawai in *It's a Summer Film!* (21), and *Hand* (22). His recent film works include *Modern or Anarchy* (23), *Winny* (23), *52 Hertz no Kujiratachi* (24), while for dramas, he has appeared in Netflix's *Sanctuary* (23), among others.



KANICHIRO

Born in 1996, raised in Tokyo. He debuted as an actor in 2017. In the same year, he received the Best New Actor Award at the 27th Japan Movie Critics Awards for his role in the film *The Miracles of the Namiya General Store*. The following year, he won awards such as the Best New Actor Award at the 92nd Kinema Junpo Best Ten Awards and the TFF Award for New Age Actor at the 33rd Takasaki Film Festival for his performance in *The Chrysanthemum and the Guillotine*. He has appeared in notable works such as the NHK's historical drama *The 13 Lords of the Shogun* (22), as well as the films *Phases of the Moon* (22), *Okiku and the World* (23), *Kubi* (23), *Migawari Mission* (24), and others. In recent years, he has also been seen in *Promised Land* (24) and *Sisamu* (24). He is the son of Koichi Sato and the grandson of Rentaro Mikuni.



DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

How did you start writing the script?

I thought about depicting power and insincerity within a human relationship, so the very first plot that I wrote was completely different. It was something like *THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VON KANT* by Fassbinder, where an older woman dominates a younger one. But this didn't work out. Next, I thought about *LA MAMAN ET LA PUTAIN*, one of my favorite films, and about films by Cassavetes and Claire Denis. When writing a script, I always watch movies I love to get inspired. Of course, I refer to them as well. This time, I mainly watched the works of Maurice Pialat, Lou Ye, and Cassavetes and also shared them with some of the cast and crew. Some of the recent works include *PARIS 13th DISTRICT* by Jacques Audiard and *RED ROCKET* by Sean Baker, which gave me the courage to depict hopeless protagonists charmingly.

I always write spontaneously, so I never think of a complex structure. In the end, I finished my script in less than a month. A young Japanese female, who is a bit bipolar, forced to live in this chaotic world, without any clear desire... I'm a lot like her. However, I wanted some universality for the character, so I talked with many of the cast and crew, including Yuumi, and drew from their experiences to complete the story. (For example, the scene where Honda breaks down crying on the street is based on the experience of a young film crew, and the scene where Hayashi counts Kana's spine is from a sweet memory of another.)

Could you introduce the cast?

I met Yuumi Kawai before she became an actor—when she was a high school senior, and I was 21. She came to see my first feature, "Amiko," and handed me a letter saying, "I want to act one day. Please consider me as one of your cast members." She had a "nice face," so I remember her clearly. Anyone who sees this film will realize how wonderful an actor she is, but it was much more than I expected. I always go on with production, unsure of how it will end up, and I will know in the editing room that it'll be something interesting. But this time, watching Yuumi's performance in rehearsals (especially in the scene where she cries after telling her ex that she had an abortion), I was confident that by just following her with a camera, this film would turn out okay.

Daichi Kaneko, who plays Hayashi, Kana's new love interest, has a wild acting style. He just goes for it. Once, when I said, "That was good. Do it again!" which was a stupid thing to ask for, he couldn't do it. He didn't remember what he just did, which made it even more interesting. Watching his previous works, I was always drawn to his authentic performances, but now I understand why. His chemistry with Yuumi was great, too. In the scene where the two fight, the more serious they got, the more hysterical it was.

On the other hand, Kanichiro who plays Honda, the guy who gets dumped,

acts very precisely, which also requires a lot of skill. He can repeat the same performance and always stands in position as instructed. I've never worked with an actor so accurate, so it surprised me. He understood the script and the character of Honda and proactively embarrassed himself in front of the camera. He, too, had a shockingly strong chemistry with Yuumi, which makes me want to praise myself for my perfect casting. Every time Honda appeared, it made me laugh, and he jumped into the frame with existence so strong that I was amazed.

It was a miracle that we found the three; this film wouldn't have happened without them. The other cast members are wonderful as well. I approached some of them directly, but we mainly selected them through an audition.

Could you tell us about production and the team?

We shot the film from the end of September 2023 for about two weeks around Tokyo.

I have been friends with Shin Yonekura, the cinematographer, for quite some time. He's someone that can freely discuss films with. When we shot a five-minute short together, although we decided on a fixed camera, because he forgot his tripod on a train, we ended up shooting with a hand-held. But we realized it was the right decision in the end. So, I had no worries about communication with him, and he also brought good mood to the set.

Because every cast and crew were young, we could exchange ideas actively. I've recently learned to appreciate other people's thoughts, listen to them, and apply them every day, so the shoot for this film has been very fulfilling. I rarely enjoy being on set, so strangely, this rather made me anxious.

Keijiro Akiyama, in charge of lighting, has worked for all the hip Japanese movies of our time, but I feel that he especially proved his creativity with this film. Shin, the DP, explained to him beforehand that the lighting continuity didn't matter, even between each shot. The method Keijiro took was extremely interesting; when selecting color filters, he told his assistants to choose whichever color they wanted. He probably had a plan as well, but at the same time, I realized he was expressing what he felt on the spot.

I've directed impromptu in my previous works, but thanks to the two, I felt more at ease on set this time. As the days went by, it was obvious that the other crew and cast members, too, were relaxed and doing as they pleased.

Looking back on post-production, how was the process?

It took about three weeks to edit, and rushes were still three hours long. I often hear rushes are usually so terrible that it's unbearable, but mine was entertaining from the start. Especially the campfire scene that Banri Nagase edited made me cry for some reason. So I was confident that it would turn out to be a good film. The problem was the duration. Ultimately, I took out about ten scenes to shorten it to 137 minutes. It's far from short, but I feel this length was needed for the film.

Miki Nomura, who was in charge of the sound, studied in France and was on the same team as Niels Barletta, the sound engineer for *PARIS, 13th DISTRICT*

during training. She's the only person in Japan who works according to the approach in France, so I remember getting excited when she mentioned, "What I do with sound is almost the same as what's done in *PARIS, 13th DISTRICT*, which I know you love." With this film, I asked her not to make the sounds so clear.

Music is created by Takuma Watanabe. My only request was that it be electronic music, but I was surprised every time he sent over a new tune. It was much more solid than I expected, and I was sometimes drawn back, thinking it was too strong. However, I remember what he told me about the music for the end credits. He said, "After watching a movie depicting anxiety about an existence, we shouldn't choose music to simply make the audience think it was a good movie." And that's why the music used in the credits makes us feel like it's the end of the world, or on the contrary, the Genesis. Thus, the film was completed at the end of December.

With the film being completed, how do you feel now?

The year went by in a second, and there were countless struggles. But the experience was so therapeutic that it soothed my soul, making me forget it all. I always try to make something I can only create at that moment, and this was, more than ever, those kinds of films. I feel fortunate that I could make it as a twenty-six-year-old with no need to stretch myself.

DESERT OF NAMIBIA (Original Title: Namibia No Sabaku)

Cannes Directors' Fortnight 2024 / WORLD PREMIERE

Cast:

Yuumi Kawai (as Kana)
Daichi Kaneko (as Hayashi)
Kanichiro (as Honda)
Yuzumi Shintani, Keisuke Horibe, Makiko Watanabe

Written & Directed by: Yoko Yamanaka

Produced by: Keisuke Konishi, Shinji Ogawa, Masafumi Yamada, Tokushi Suzuki
Co-Producer: Satoshi Goto
Executive Producers: Keisuke Konishi, Sanggi Choi, Shinsuke Mae, Mizue Kunizane

Director of Photography: Shin Yonekura
Editor: Banri Nagase
Lights: Keijiro Akiyama, Daiki Kato, Miwa Taguchi
Sound: Tomohiro Kobata
Production Designer: Ran Kobayashi
Set Decorator: Akira Maeda
Sound Editor: Tatsuya Obo
Hair & Makeup: Kayo Komoto
Stylist: Eri Takayama
Music: Takuma Watanabe

Production: Happinet Phantom Studios / BRIDGEHEAD Co., Ltd. / cogitoworks Ltd.

Happinet Phantom Studios Presents
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Feature film | 137 min | Japan | Color | 4:3 | 5.1ch

CONTACT DETAILS:

Distribution: Happinet Phantom Studios
<https://happinet-phantom.com/>
Tel: +81 3 6862 0361

French Distribution: EUROZOOM
<https://www.eurozoom.fr/>
Alba Fouché (alba@eurozoom.fr)

French Press: Bureaux de presse
Rachel Bouillon (rachel@rb-presse.fr)
Julien Vivet (julien@rb-presse.fr)

International Press: ANYWAYS
Florence Alexandre (florence@anyways.fr)
Tel: +33 1 48 24 12 91
Mobile: + 33 6 31 87 17 54
louna@anyways.fr
johanna@anyways.fr

International Sales: Happinet Phantom Studios
<https://happinet-phantom.com/>
Rie Hatano (rie.hatano@hsn.happinet.co.jp)
Tel: +81 3 6862 0361