‘Boys’ for rent in Tokyo: Sex, lies and vulnerable young lives

Rob Gilhooly  Nov 23, 2017

At a glance, First Dash is just a regular Tokyo bar. Customers laugh and drink, their animated chatter competing with the monotonous beat of techno thumping through speakers hovering somewhere above dimmed, orange-tinted lights.

When a customer enters, however, a row of eight fresh-faced young men who had previously been gathered around the bar counter glued to their smartphones suddenly rise to their feet and in unison bark out a well-rehearsed greeting: “Irasshaimase!”

The customer — a portly, balding middle-aged man in a nondescript suit — shuffles over to a table followed by a slightly built teenage lad, ruffled locks partly shielding a furtive, floor-fixed stare.

“He’s here for an interview ... and kenshū,” says bar manager Toshiyuki Matsuura, using a Japanese term for “training” that in everyday parlance would do little to raise any eyebrows.

On this occasion, however, the stocky customer is the instructor, and the “trainee” has been put through a rigorous day-long test to see if he can perform the job at hand, work in which many of the other staffers — who are referred to in this part of Shinjuku’s Ni-chome district as “boys” — are already well-versed.

They are known as urisen and their job is to “entertain” First Dash’s customers, who are almost entirely men.
Urisen to offer: Toshiyuki Matsuura is a manager at First Dash in Shinjuku's Ni-chome district. | ROB GILHOOLY

“I think of myself as a kind of hedonist — I’ll do anything if it makes me feel good,” says “Hiroshi,” a strong-jawed 18-year-old “boy” from Chiba who, at 187 centimeters tall, is forced to stoop slightly as he makes his way across the floor of the cramped bar. “The clients I have served are aged between around 30 and 65. Usually they are masochists who want me to be, well, you know, domineering.”

For over 35 years, men have visited the bar, one of around 400 gay establishments in Shinjuku Ni-chome — Japan’s indubitable gay hub — to purchase the services of hundreds of young men like Hiroshi. While some want nothing more than a bit of company over dinner, others want a whole lot more, performing acts that in some cases could be argued verge on abuse, even rape.

“There are guidelines as to what I’m required to do,” says Hiroshi, who entered the business partly for the money, partly in an attempt to work out
his sexual orientation. “But I’m willing to keep an open mind. I have no problem with gay people and don’t understand those who do. My sister is lesbian, and so is my aunt. ... I can tolerate pretty much anyone — except rorikon (adults sexually attracted to children). They disgust me.”

Ian Thomas Ash, executive producer of the ‘Boys for Sale’ documentary. | ROB GILHOOLY

The subject of urisen is at the center of a film titled “Baibai Boizu” (“Boys for Sale”), whose production was led by two foreign Japan residents. Since its release earlier this year, the documentary, directed by the singularly named Itako, has been screened in over 25 film festivals around the globe, including London’s Raindance and Los Angeles’ Outfest.

Many urisen interviewed for the film, whose more intimate on-the-job moments are cleverly represented by often-explicit animation sequences, are uneducated, occasionally homeless young men who cite financial hardships, even crippling debts, for taking on the work. It also highlights how some bar owners and managers willfully conceal crucial information.
about the nature of the work and potential health risks.

“I think the film tells a lot about the vulnerability of young people, particularly when they are economically disadvantaged and how they can be taken advantage of,” says Ian Thomas Ash, a Tokyo-based filmmaker from New York and executive producer of the film, which will make its Japan premiere on Nov. 26 during Tokyo AIDS Week.

“But we didn’t want viewers to go away thinking these guys are being victimized. Sure, there’s a willful holding back of information by owners, but there is also an almost willful ignorance on the part of the urisen.”

A legal business with a history

The urisen (rent boy) industry dates back to Japan’s growth years of the 1960s and ’70s, though its roots are thought to be found in Edo Period
Japan (1603 -1868), when bisexuality was commonplace and male concubines found favor even with shoguns.

It continues to exist today thanks to a loophole in Japan’s Anti-Prostitution Law, which mentions nothing about paid sex between men. According to experts, the government has no plan to revise this, although it came under some scrutiny in 2015 when Liberal Democratic Party lawmaker Takaya Muto was accused of engaging in sexual acts with a 19-year-old male prostitute on a number of occasions — a case that never went to court due to a lack of legal recourse.

While urisen clients are invariably homosexual, urisen themselves are mostly straight, though even those who are gay are told to pretend they are heterosexual as it provides an enticing challenge for many clients, according to Shingo, 28, a manager at First Dash who until recently worked as an urisen.

“We have 42 boys here, aged between 18 and 20,” says Shingo, passing over an iPad showing pictures and profiles of each of them. None of them knows exactly what’s required until they come for an interview, and some even have the impression that they will be paid to have sex with women, he says.

“Usually you can tell straightaway which ones will be able to do the work required of them. Money talk sometimes convinces some of the more reticent ones.”

Some decide it’s not for them and turn to jobs such as construction work paying ¥5,000 to ¥8,000 a day, he says. “Those who accept can earn that in an hour here,” he adds.

A former urisen who goes by the name of “Ko” says that this is one example of how management continues to find ways to deceive new intakes. While his monthly income could reach as much as ¥800,000, including “tips,”
the situation is not always so rosy for some in the industry today, he says.

“The place I worked at employed about 100 urisen, 10 of whom, including me, were gay, the rest straight,” says Ko, who spent three years as an urisen and whose tip size would depend on what he was prepared to do.

“Regardless of sexual orientation, though, financial problems along with criminal convictions were common reasons for going into this work, though the pay is not what it used to be and turnover these days is pretty high. It’s clear in some cases that good looks are no longer a priority,” he says, for employers. “Some of the urisen look frankly ugly and really badly off, but the key question in this business is: Can you hack the work?”

First Dash’s Hiroshi says his average income is ¥10,000 per day, which he supplements with a daytime job. Another urisen, who uses the name “Shota” and works independently, says monthly income can be as little as ¥150,000. “It depends on the client — some are just regular salarymen types with little extra cash to burn, others lawyers, doctors, even teachers. I’ve even heard of well-known politicians and celebrities, Japanese and foreign, going to urisen for sex. To all of them, we are just a product.”
Film’s disturbing revelations

“Boys for Sale” includes interviews with two young men — one from Fukushima Prefecture, the other from Iwate — who have both ended up as urisen due to the loss of their homes and livelihoods following the March 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster.

Both moved to Tokyo to find work and accommodation and were scouted off the streets as they arrived fresh off the train in the capital. According to Ash, one of them told him he heard the words “money” and “dorm,” and that had been enough to convince him to sign up.

According to one NPO in the devastated region, this is not an uncommon trend, and one that is not limited to young men. “I have heard of young women affected by the disasters who have been forced into sex work in Tokyo,” says Yuko Kusano of Miyagi Jonetto.
Perhaps the most disturbing revelation in the film is how poorly schooled interviewees are in sexual health matters. Some appear to have no or only a vague notion as to what sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are or how they can be transmitted. Soap, mouthwash and brushing teeth are cited as being effective ways to prevent them. One urisen is unsure if men can even get STDs.

Ash says he is occasionally asked by film viewers if he ever attempted to educate the urisen.

“These are people who don’t even possess the vocab to describe parts of their body or substances that come out of it,” Ash says of the urisen interviewees, whom he and fellow producer and director of photography Adrian Storey put in front of the camera — some with masks to conceal their identities — for one hour each within the confined space of a typical room where they would fornicate with their clients. “So you’re not going to get far trying to make them understand why it’s dangerous to brush your teeth before oral sex.”

Indeed, the same lack of awareness is apparent with regard to HIV/AIDS. First Dash’s Hiroshi admits to sometimes having unprotected sex, both at work and in private life, but is unconcerned about contracting AIDS. “It’s curable now, right?” he says.

Statistics show that this lack of concern about HIV/AIDS among young Japanese is part of a new and worrying trend.

“Many young people, not just those working in the sex industry, do not know about HIV/AIDS,” says Yuzuru Ikushima, executive director of Place Tokyo, which offers information on HIV prevention, supports people who have contracted HIV and also conducts surveys of HIV and AIDS prevalence among gay and bisexual men. “This is different from older age groups — even people in their 30s and 40s — who are aware of the dangers largely due to AIDS panics and incidents that have gone before.”
An example, he says, is the scandal that rocked Japan in the 1980s and ’90s, where up to 2,000 hemophilia patients contracted HIV via tainted blood products. “Since then there have been no such incidents in the news, and anyone under the age of 25 is oblivious to the dangers of AIDS. When it comes to prevention all they are told about at school is condoms, but even then, they are poorly educated in how to use them.”

Particularly vulnerable are those in the sex industry, especially those who are in a weak position, financially or physically, such as urisen — who fit the AIDS-unaware age profile almost too well.

“If a bar operator has a strict condom policy, that’s one thing, but ... as there is money being exchanged, if the customer wants unprotected sex, I can imagine sex workers might find it difficult to say no. In the case of urisen, the boys are young and customers are invariably gay men, so this is another layer of concern that needs to be addressed,” Ikushima says.

Instilling a sense of responsibility among bar managers and owners is also essential, Ikushima says, although this concern is not confined to the urisen industry. Indeed, a similar lack of instruction on sexual health would seem to exist in host clubs, an industry that traditionally pairs handsome young men with female clientele, though not officially for sex.

“We never mention such matters as sexual health, STDs or HIV to our staff at interviews,” says Ryo Tachibana of Goldman Club in Shinjuku. “I’m sure
unprotected sex is also requested. You just assume, for their own sakes, they will be careful.”

One host, who requested anonymity, said to his knowledge unprotected sex was “not unusual” among hosts.

Kota Iwahashi, president of akta, an NPO that works to raise awareness of issues surrounding HIV/AIDS. | ROB GILHOOLY

The wider STD knowledge gap

An organization that has been searching for a solution to this problem since its inauguration over a decade ago is akta, an HIV/AIDS awareness NPO based in the heart of Ni-chome.

One of its main projects is an outreach program that delivers condoms and flyers about HIV testing and prevention to gay bars and cruising spots known as hattenba in the district. Every week, volunteers deliver to around
half of the gay establishments in the area that are participating in the NPO’s Delivery Boys program, says akta President Kohta Iwahashi.

“Awareness has changed since we started operations in 2003,” he says. “Then it was difficult to gain cooperation among gay-bar operators whose customers questioned why contraceptives were being placed in a bar frequented almost entirely by gay men, or there would be the attitude of ‘Don’t bring talk of diseases to a district where people have come to enjoy themselves.’”

According to Iwahashi, one change is the gradual increase in the number of MSM (men who have sex with men) getting tested, which has risen 10 percent over the past decade. “Those getting tested for HIV now stand at around 30-35 percent, which is low compared with some Western nations but increasing nonetheless.”

There is now also talk of the arrival in Japan of an HIV-prevention drug for high-risk people known as PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis), which has been available in the U.S. since 2012 and been approved for use in Britain.

Reflecting Ikushima’s observations about a lack of HIV/AIDS awareness among the under-25s, however, are worrying statistics that show an increase in HIV diagnoses among that age group, from 65 cases in 2002 to 141 last year, according to health ministry data.

While incidences of HIV among Japanese aged 30 and over are still high, they have leveled out over the past decade, Iwahashi says. However, when it comes to the under-25s, surveys have unveiled a steep upward curve “of the kind never seen before,” he says.

“Whichever way you look at it, in Japan HIV/AIDS is a predominantly MSM problem and 73 percent of those who contracted HIV in 2016 were Japanese MSM,” says Iwahashi. “When you look at where the major movements are, it’s among younger MSM. And the background to that is
the awareness issue.”

For all the apparent downsides of the industry, many urisen comment on a unique camaraderie that exists. “At one point there were so many urisen boys cramped into the small dorm room I lived in you couldn’t lie down to sleep and we’d take turns sleeping outside the toilet,” says Ko. “But that was all part of the fun.”

First Dash’s Hiroshi agrees. “There’s a special bond,” he says. “No matter how bad it gets, we’re in it together.”

Ian Thomas Ash, “Ko” and Kota Iwahashi of akta will speak after a screening of “Boys for Sale” (www.boysforsale.com) at the Nakano Industrial Promotion Center (www.nakano-sangyoushinkou.jp) on Nov. 26 from 3:30 p.m. as part of Tokyo AIDS Week (www.aidsweeks.tokyo/schedule/1126-1530-movie-talk).
Foreign men defy drop in HIV/AIDS cases

Numbers of HIV and AIDS cases among foreign residents in Japan continue to rise, according to health ministry statistics.

In 2016, homosexual contact accounted for 72.7 percent (735 cases) of all HIV infection cases (905) in Japan, while heterosexual contact (170) accounted for 16.8 percent, according to a Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare study. For reported AIDS cases (total 355), homosexual contact accounted for 55.1 percent (241) and heterosexual contact 26.1 percent (114). A further 82 HIV and 65 AIDS cases were listed as status “unknown.”

Yet while the figures for Japanese nationals have remained relatively stable over the past six years, even decreasing since 2012, the same can’t be said of HIV and AIDS cases among foreign residents, particularly men. Between 2005 and 2015, HIV cases among foreign males reached 108, including a more-than-four-fold increase among foreign men who have sex with men (MSM) (from 15 in 2005 to 66 in 2015). In 2016 that shot up further to 126 reported cases, although non-MSM case numbers were virtually unchanged. AIDS cases between 2015 and 2016 increased from 38 to 43.

In the past, women from Southeast Asia involved in the sex industry were thought to make up the bulk of foreign residents with HIV, says Kota Iwahashi, head of the HIV/AIDS awareness NPO akta. “Looking at the data, while those numbers have been decreasing for some time, the number of MSM foreigners who have contracted HIV has been growing.” Indeed, since 2014 there have been more foreign MSM than foreign women living in Japan with HIV, he added.

A major problem is the dearth of places for non-Japanese to get sexual health check-ups with English-language support, says Place Tokyo’s Yuzuru Ikushima, adding that at present the only place providing such a service is the Shinjuku public health center.
The majority (57.7 percent) of Japanese nationals who find out they are HIV-positive discover their status during visits to hospitals for other treatments, he says, which shows just how crucial specific sexual health check-ups are. According to Ikushima’s findings, of that unwitting 57.7 percent, almost 90 percent are found to have full-blown AIDS.

“With the Tokyo Olympics approaching, it has never been more crucial to provide foreign-language testing and support,” he says.

The accumulated total of HIV and AIDS cases in Japan in 2016 was 18,920 and 8,523, respectively — approximately 0.015 percent and 0.007 percent of the population. In contrast, 39,513 people in the U.S. received an HIV diagnosis and 18,303 an AIDS diagnosis in 2015 alone. The overall prevalence of HIV in the U.S. was around 0.3 percent of the population. In Europe, nearly two-thirds of new HIV cases in 2015 were in Russia (98,177).