Crawl Into Bed, Watch This Show, Feel Better About Life

It's gripping, weirdly soothing, and utterly mundane all at the same time. If you're not already watching "Terrace House," prepare to become obsessed.

By Rebecca Bates (@re.beccabates)

What *Is* "Terrace House" Exactly?

This publicity photo is as posed as "Terrace House" ever gets.

I'll get right to it: *Terrace House*, the Japanese reality show that appeared on U.S. Netflix late last year, is the most comforting, most compelling, realest reality show on TV. The conceit is familiar on its face: Six strangers, three men and three women, move into a beautiful house. Almost everyone on the show is actively looking to fall in love—when a new housemate arrives to replace one who's just left, the other housemates greet their new roommate with, "What's your type?!"

What's missing is the high-octane drama most Americans come to expect from reality TV. When the cast has parties, only the housemates are there. When conflicts arise, usually a polite conversation is enough to resolve building tension. And being on the show is not the only thing these young people have going on. Some are finishing high school, college, or grad school; others are trying to establish themselves in their careers—there are models, an illustrator, an architect, a hat designer, a hairstylist, even someone who very vaguely describes himself as an "aspiring firefighter."

There are dozens and dozens of episodes of this show. Have at it. Just go nuts.

If this sounds a little boring, that's because in the place of a manufactured reality, audiences get something that looks like their own experiences as young adults. *Terrace House* makes up for this lack of spectacle as, a few times each episode, the show cuts to a studio where a panel of Japanese comedians and entertainers analyze the scenes audiences have just watched in a way that's equal parts insightful and scathing.

Ryota Yamasato (right) is the show's resident curmudgeon, delighting in the cast's mishaps.

Sweet spoke with *Terrace House* fan favorite, commentator and comedian Ryota Yamasato (known as Yamachan), about Japanese and American dating cultures, his take on the show's most important moments, and what makes for perfect reality TV.

The Cross-Cultural Charm of Japanese Reality TV

The roommates try to have dinner together as much as possible, like a family.

What do you think of American reality or dating shows?

American shows involving romances tend to be a little messier—it's much less clear whether one person likes another person or not, and the consequences come much sooner than the Japanese romances, which are a little slow-burning.

Terrace House: Boys and Girls in the City was shot in Tokyo, but *Terrace House: Aloha State* was shot in Hawaii, and a few of the housemates have already lived in the U.S. What are some of the cultural differences between the casts?

It's true that the expressions of affection are a little different. Also, when it comes to the idea of defining an exclusive relationship, it seems like it's not expressed verbally in a black-and-white way in America. The couple or the friends are having a really good time, and oftentimes, I'm watching, thinking, "So, what is their status on a romantic scale?" I can't always figure out whether they want to stay friends or whether they're actually starting to like each other.

But I don't represent popular men in Japan at all. The other commentators have said to me that kind of romance exists, where you don't have to make it clear what state you are in. What I'm saying may not be true at all, because, just to reiterate, I represent the unpopular Japanese male!

It does seem like, compared to the other commentators, you're arguably the show's biggest skeptic. I've seen you actively root against certain couples, and in at least once instance, you accurately predicted that the couple wouldn't work out.

The housemates on the show seem to feel like their romance is something that everybody wants to experience. I'm here to say that, no, not everybody aspires to experience romances like you guys. When the romance takes a turn for the worst, I feel validated.

In *Aloha State*, one of the roommates, Eric, promises to teach another roommate how to surf. But when they get to the beach, he ditches her. A couple of the other roommates confront him later about this, and the *Terrace House* commentators remark that that was a very American way to handle to the situation. What did you all mean by that?

I hope I don't offend you…

You won't.

Maybe it's the roommates' efficiency. Rather than going on and on about the emotional side of things, I felt like in that moment, they were thinking, "What would benefit me the most?"—not in a greedy way, but in the most efficient way, I guess. I saw that and just thought, "Oh, so that's the way they handle conflict overseas."

Now, Yamachan's Guide to the "Terrace House" Moments You Need to Know

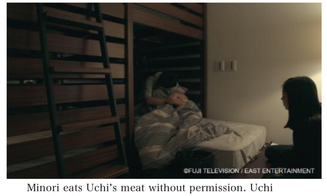
No. 1: The One Where the Guy Asks Out All the Girls

In one of the first few episodes of *Boys and Girls in the City*, the hairstylist Uchi asks out every girl roommate during dinner. This seemed *incredibly* awkward to me, especially because they all say yes! But it also seemed like a lot of posturing…

Yeah, all of us at the studio saw him that way, too. He wasn't experienced in all things romance, in the end. But during that first week, it seemed like he was used to dating. This arrogant, popular guy was asking all the girls out—like, to try each of them. I thought that was really the worst thing a guy can do.

Then we found out that it all stemmed from his inexperience with girls. He needed to figure out how to navigate romance. I probably would have really hated him, but when we found out that it was an act that stemmed from inexperience, that he *wasn't* very popular with the girls to begin with, I really liked him.

No. 2: The One Where the Girlfriend Eats All the Food



Minori eats Uchi's meat without permission. Uchi crawls into bed and sobs.

Later, Uchi is seriously dating Minori, and they've been having arguments about how Minori's not very ambitious. Minori cooks steak that was given to Uchi as a gift by some clients, without his permission. When Uchi finds out, he crawls into bed and cries, and you and the other commentators called this mishap the "Meat Crime." Was the "Meat Crime" *really* about the meat?

If it had been just about the meat being cooked without his consent, that would have been the best comedy ever. But, of course, it wasn't; that really was the last straw for Uchi, and he just broke down. Uchi had been irritated because Minori doesn't seem to be making an effort. She's not a very sensitive girl; she didn't even have the compassion to think about what Uchi might feel about her eating the meat. That just added to the stress that already had built, and contributed to him crying, exploding.

No. 3: The One Where Reality TV Stops Being Nice, Starts Being Real

Two other roommates, Riko and Hayato, start dating, and Riko says she can't imagine getting physical with a guy unless he was her boyfriend. But then the roommates figure out Riko and Hayato have been sneaking around when cameras aren't rolling, and they confront them. Why did Riko and Hayato say they did this to protect Riko's career?

Riko wants to be what we call an "idol" in Japan. *[Interpreter note: That's kind of a TV, J-Pop personality who sings and dances and tends to become this kind of ideal girlfriend figure for a lot of the fans.]* She has this career she knows that she's going to pursue even after she leaves the show. She decides to play this character who's in love with the idea of being in love, because she thinks that that would be what her fans would seek in an idol character. Of course, she was deceiving us. In that sense, I think she's a great actress.

No. 4: The One Where Yusuke's Never Been on a Date

Lauren bails on the second half of her date with Yusuke, and he eats catfish alone on a cafe patio.

In *Aloha State*, the roommates push Yusuke, who has never been on a date, to ask out Lauren. It seems like they're setting him up to fail, because, as a viewer, it's very obvious that Lauren does not reciprocate his feelings. Was that obvious as a commentator? Was it right for the roommates to keep encouraging Yusuke to ask her out?

Yeah, we thought it was fair, because there another scene that's only featured on the YouTube channel of *Terrace House*, where we see everybody at the dining table, practicing how to profess their love for another person, and the two of them are there as well. We sensed maybe a little bit of a possibility between the two of them. On Yusuke's part, even as an inexperienced guy, he felt like if he didn't make a move, nothing would change. I think the flatmates were trying to give him a chance. In that sense, I thought it was fair.

One of the commentators opens every episode by saying, "Konbanwa!" [Good evening!] You'll come to find this soothing.

Terrace House: Boys and Girls in the City, which aired in Japan from 2015 to 2016, can be viewed in full on Netflix. *Terrace House: Aloha State, Part 1* premiered on Netflix in January 2017; *Aloha State, Part 2* releases on Netflix today.