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Perspective of Diversity in Japanese Pop Culture

Exploring the case of Seiyu Awards, often likened to the Academy Awards for voice acting talent

Ryo Koarai¹

Current Landscape of Japanese Seiyu

On March 9, the 18th annual Seiyu (voice actor/actress) Awards were held in Japan. Kana Ichinose (as Suletta Mercury from Mobile Suit Gundam: The Witch From Mercury) and Kazuki Ura (as Yoichi Isagi from BLUELOCK) won the “Best Seiyu in a Leading Role” award.

Japanese pop culture, particularly anime, has gained immense global traction, with voice actors (Seiyu) playing a pivotal role. The primary tasks of Seiyu include lending their voice to anime characters, dubbing non-Japanese movies, and narrating TV programs and commercials. Unlike English voice actors/actresses, the rising popularity of anime in Japanese society has placed Japanese Seiyu in a unique position. Seiyu, recognized by audiences of all ages, are becoming as popular as famous movie stars and TV personalities. Consequently, their scope of work has been expanding, with some appearing on TV programs and dramas, releasing songs, performing live at famous venues, and even assuming roles such as tourism ambassadors or honorary chiefs of police stations for a day.

The Seiyu Awards have been held since 2006 to honor significant achievements. The awards can be likened to the Academy Awards. At this annual event, winners are chosen by the Seiyu Awards Planning Committee/Selection Committee (of which the author is a member) from the most memorable Seiyu or titles of the year. The award ceremony is held in Tokyo in March and broadcast live online. Notably, the award named “Most Valuable Seiyu” is selected by fan voting.

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18th Seiyu Awards Ceremony

This year's ceremony, held on March 9 in Tokyo, was particularly memorable. Prior to the event, news of the passing of Akira Toriyama, the creator of Dragon Ball, and TARAKO, the voice behind Maruko from the Japanese national title Chibi Maruko-chan, shocked the industry. Both artists were the backbone of the burgeoning Japanese pop culture, and all participants observed a moment of silence in their memory before the ceremony began.

The winners of the 18th annual awards are listed below. Thanks to anime streaming, some anime fans in the West have been enjoying Japanese voices with English subtitles. So, this list might include some of your favorites.

Winners of the 18th Seiyu Awards

Best Seiyu in a Leading Role

Kana Ichinose (as Suletta Mercury from Mobile Suit Gundam: The Witch From Mercury)

Kazuki Ura (as Yoichi Isagi from BLUELOCK)

Best Seiyu in Supporting Roles

Mamiko Noto (as Prospera Mercury from Mobile Suit Gundam: The Witch From Mercury)

Manaka Iwami (as Akane Kurokawa from Oshi no Ko)

Yōhei Azakami (as Guel Jeturk from Mobile Suit Gundam: The Witch From Mercury)

Rookie Seiyu Award

Hina Yomiya (as Kuumi from Giant Beasts of Ars)

Kikunosuke Toya (as Denji from Chainsaw Man)

Nanoka Hara (as Suzume Iwato from Suzume)

Yuki Sakakihara (as Polka Shinoyama from Dead Mount Death Play)

Yurie Igoma (as Ruby Hoshino from Oshi no Ko)

Singing Award

Kessoku Band (from Bocchi the Rock!)

Radio Personality Award

None

Imported Movies and Dramas Award

Kunio Murai (as Indiana Jones from Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny)

Mitsuki Takahata (as Barbie from Barbie)

Game Award

Yuuya Uchida (as Clive Rosfield from FINAL FANTASY XIV)

Synergy Award

The First Slam Dunk

Kei Tomiyama/Kazue Takahashi Award

Akemi Okamura (as Nami from One Piece)

Nozomu Sasaki (as Yuusuke Urameshi from Yu Yu Hakusho)

Children and Family Award

The Super Mario Bros. Movie

Influencer Award

Sumire Uesaka (as Lum from Urusei Yatsura)

Most Valuable Seiyu (MVS)

Yūichi Nakamura (as Satoru Gojō from Jujutsu Kaisen)

Distinguished Service Award

Eiko Yamada as (Anne Shirley from Anne of Green Gables)

Toshio Furukawa (as Piccolo from Dragon Ball)

Special Distinguished Service Award

Mentioned Seiyu who passed away during the current year.

Evolution of Seiyu Awards

For a considerable duration, Japanese Seiyu have lent their voices to an array of characters regardless of gender, age, race, and even the organic or inorganic nature. Even if they are female, they portray boy characters, and vice versa, seamlessly transitioning between genders. Sometimes, they play a cat, an alien, a talking sword, or even a talking vending machine. The paramount focus remains on the

voice act, and conventional notions of identity such as gender, age, and race do not constrain their work. For instance, during the production of Dragon Ball, Seiyu were sought based on their ability to capture the essence of Saiyan characters, rather than strict adherence to matching personalities.

Notably, the Seiyu Awards, as evident from the list above, have eliminated gender distinctions in their awards, a step preceding renowned ceremonies such as the Academy Awards. For example, categories such as the award for Voice Actor in a Leading Role (male seiyu) and the award for Voice Actress in a Leading Role (female seiyu) were merged into the inclusive Seiyu in a Leading Role award.

This progressive move suggests that this event transcends mere celebration of pop culture, potentially heralding a subtle yet significant shift in Japanese society, which is gradually trying to achieve inclusivity.

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