

I began watching anime while I was growing up in the 1990's, however at the time I simply knew it as cartoons. Among the first shows that I ever watched were the *Samurai Pizza Cats*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, the original *Dragon Ball* and *Sailor Moon*. I've watched countless other titles since then. However, I've reached a point that I think every anime fan will eventually reach at some point in their lives. To be frank, I haven't watched any anime in over

three years because I've grown bored of it. I still read manga from time to time, but it just doesn't give me the thrills that it used to. Many of my friends share the same feelings that I do. Why is that? Is it because of the many redundant storylines and fight scenes? Is it because we know anime so well that we can predict what happens in an episode? Or is it simply because we've reached a different stage in our lives?

During our teenage years, everyone deals with a certain amount of drama in their lives. Watching my favorite anime-shows provided me with a means to escape

from the drama that junior high is known for. When I reached high school, that was a transition period for me. By the time I was in grade 12, I found that I was watching anime less and less because there were important life choices that I had to make. During this period of my life, a new show was announced in January 2003, titled *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon*. At the

DRAMA! DRAMA! DRAMA!

Move over anime, this is all about Japanese evening drama!
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By Meghan Boudreau

time, I had just finished the entire *Sailor Moon* anime in Japanese, so I was quite surprised to hear that a live action version of the show was planned for the fall of that year. I was extremely skeptical at the time, because I couldn't see *Sailor Moon* working as a live action show due to the magical girl nature of the series. But I decided to wait to see the trailers later that year before making any comments or predictions about the show. When the show premiered, it was everything I expected it to be and more. Most of the acting and special effects were terrible, but my inner otaku loved it because of the nostalgia factor. After all, *Sailor Moon* was my favorite anime when I was a child! Not surprisingly, it didn't last beyond one season and a few spe-

cial that were put directly on DVD due to the poor ratings that the show suffered.

I continued to watch the careers of the Sailor Soldiers, the main actresses who "graduated" from the show. It was largely because of this recent incarnation of the *Sailor Moon* franchise that got me interested in the evening dramas that air in Japan, known as *dorama*. Particularly, Keiko Kitagawa, the actress whose role was Sailor Mars was one of the most successful girls to graduate from the show, getting several acting and modeling roles every year during the run of *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon* and since it ended back in 2004. Among some of the highlights in Kitagawa's career; she appeared as a regular model in *Seventeen* magazine (Japan) for three

years from 2003 until 2006 and she made her first international debut as an actress in a minor role as Reiko in *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006).

One of her first movies I watched is called *Mizu Ni Samu Hana (Romance of Darkness, 2006)*, based on a manga of the same name by Chie Shinohara. Aki Maeda (*Battle Royale, 2000*) played the role of Rikka Nikaido, an average high school girl whose life was turned upside down after she survived a bus accident that killed her entire class during a field trip. Isn't it a little strange that she was the sole survivor? After she recovered from the accident and returned to her swim club, she became the victim of strange attacks at the pool.



From left to right: Keiko Kitagawa (Sailor Mars), Ayaka Komatsu (Sailor Venus), Mew Azama (Sailor Jupiter), Rika Izumi (formerly known as Chisaki Hama, Sailor Mercury) and Myuu Sawai (Sailor Moon) in *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon* (2003-2004)

Source photo: *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon Photobook*

Published by Sony Magazines Inc, Japan, 2004

Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon ©2003 Naoko Takeuchi, Toei Co. Ltd.

“Japanese drama has provided me with something different and in a way, brings me a little closer to Japan.”

Maki (Yuika Motokariya) and Rina (Keiko Kitagawa) in the movie Dear Friends (2007).

*Source Photo: Keiko Kitagawa Dear Friends Photobook
Published by KADOKAWA Group Publishing, Japan, 2007
Dear Friends is distributed by Toei Co. Ltd, Japan ©2007*

Kitagawa played the role of a girl with the same first name, Rikka Mizuchi, the evil monster who was responsible for the attacks against Nikaido. The attacks kept escalating when she later transfers to her class to get closer to her victim. Why does Muzuchi want Nikaido dead and what is fueling her jealousy? The movie was a little slow in the beginning, and was lacking a soundtrack for the most part, but it picks up later on. The movie is still a good watch.

Among the string of roles Kitagawa had in 2007, one of my favorite movies is called *Dear Friends*, based on a manga by YOSHI, art by Ayu Watanabe. Upon seeing the trailer for it, I was so excited for this movie that I pre-ordered the DVD when it was announced. Kitagawa played the role of Rina, a selfish high school girl who felt that friends weren't necessary and were only to be used when the time was convenient for her. Rina's relationships with everyone around her were severely affected because of this value system. Later on in the movie, Rina gets diagnosed with cancer. This was both a curse and

a blessing for Rina because it was only during her hospital stay that she discovered the true meaning of friendship. The movie was directed in a way that I have never seen in any movie made in the United States or Canada. The movie addressed the difficult and horrible issues associated with living with cancer that even today, aren't always depicted in the Hollywood films we see out there; from the awful side effects of the cancer treatment to losing hope in the fight due to the possibility of being unable to recover from the illness. It also deals with the serious issue about suicide, which I don't think is discussed enough due to the number of victims it claims every year. This movie can make anyone with a relatively normal life appreciate everything in their lives that much more. *Dear Friends* is a very dramatic movie that I feel everyone can appreciate and must see!

Later in 2007, Kitagawa landed in a starring role in an evening drama known as *Mop Girl* that aired on TV Asahi. It was based on the novel of the same title by Miaki Kato. She

played as Momoko Hasegawa, a ditzzy 21 year old who works for a funeral services company known as Little Angels. Momoko was largely responsible for clean up jobs, such as cleaning up crime scenes or transporting corpses. After surviving an accident as a child, Momoko obtained the ability to travel back in time. This ability was eventually realized by touching an item of significant importance to a person who wrongfully died. Momoko then utilizes this ability to change or prevent such future destinies from occurring. I really loved this show and to me, was a little reminiscent of the hit TV show *Heroes* that airs on CTV and NBC, which I also very much enjoyed. The ending of *Mop Girl* was somewhat confusing however. Without citing spoilers, my theory is that the show got cancelled. This would explain why the official website was deleted by TV Asahi and why it was never released on DVD. I thought *Mop Girl* was a fantastic series overall and can be enjoyed by anyone who appreciates these kinds of super hero type dramas. This is

more than help. Watching a live action drama gives us a better idea of how people speak and respond in different situations, without all the limitations typically associated with anime. Live action drama also allows the writer to reach a larger audience than they normally would using anime or cartoons. It also gives us as the viewers a better idea of realism and it becomes easier for us to relate with the characters.

With that said, I wanted to discuss the ethics of following our favorite Japanese drama. I've noticed while following both anime and drama over all these years, that drama simply hasn't gained the same level of popularity that anime has in North America and the rest of the world outside of Japan. As a result of the lack of popularity, it has made obtaining legitimate copies of dramas or movies extremely difficult. Importing legitimate copies of a show can be very costly and they often do not come with English subtitles. Therefore, many fans end up watching fan subs of their favorite series online.

“Evening dramas give us a better idea of what Japan is really like, beyond the cartoons, games and anime that we all know and love.”

to hoping that a DVD box set will get to see an official release! Just as a side note, this is not something that is unusual with dramas that air in Japan. It is quite common for a show to only last for about ten episodes. Many shows often never see multiple seasons like what we're used to here in North America. It is often a one shot deal, and then both the actors and the producers want to move onto something else.

Part of what led to Keiko Kitagawa's fame and success is her ability to play a large range of vastly different roles from her original role as Sailor Mars. She has done a wide variety of different movies and dramas, but I simply do not have the time or the space to cover them all. Today, I simply covered my favorite works so far. I do recommend checking out her other works if you are given a chance.

My interest in Japanese drama also came in part because of my contacts in Japan and also having had the opportunity to travel there for a short period. I felt that we can only see so much of Japan through watching anime and I also realized that much of the dialogue used in it was going to hinder my Japanese language skills

(Due to legal reasons, I will not tell you where to find them!) Because of the gray nature of the law, if we discover a series that we really like, I think it's extremely important to import a legitimate copy of the show. Not only does it support everyone involved in the series, but it also shows that there is international interest. This is because these production companies do take in the numbers from export websites such as CD Japan and those numbers do get considered when something gets released internationally.

While it is difficult to find domestically released copies of our favorite shows, it isn't impossible. We just have to know where to look. There are companies such as Viz Pictures that have recently started releasing live action Japanese movies such as *Train Man*, *Kamikaze Girls* and *Linda Linda Linda* to the English speaking markets. Bigger companies such as Dreamworks have made movies such as the *Ringu* series available to purchase locally. I've also found that going to the international cinema section in our favorite movie rental stores is quite helpful to give us a good idea of what movies or dramas are available to our market. Occasionally, stores

in our local China Town will carry legitimate copies, but it is really important to be observant and be aware of what you're buying because of the number of bootlegs out there. I've been able to get Korean editions of Japanese movies for a lot cheaper than the prices that we would normally get them at if we purchased the Japanese editions. Another bonus to these Chinese shops is that they often carry off-brand DVD players that are region free, so that we can watch all these imported DVDs without any restrictions.

Another way that we can keep up with the dramas that are running in Japan is by visiting the networks websites directly. I have provided a list of links from some of the major Japanese networks that will take you directly to the drama sections.

- <http://www.tbs.co.jp/drama>
- <http://www.tv-asahi.co.jp/drama>
- <http://www.fujitv.co.jp/drama/index.html>
- <http://www.ntv.co.jp/drama>
- <http://www.tv-tokyo.co.jp/index/genre/drama.html>

Finally, attending the international film festivals is also an option. Two of them are held in both Edmonton and Calgary. For further information, please visit the links that I have provided below:

- <http://calgaryfilm.com>
- <http://www.edmontonfilmfest.com>

As I mentioned before, I strongly encourage you to purchase from one of the export websites that I have provided below:

- www.cdjapan.co.jp
CD Japan specializes in almost all Japanese entertainment from movies and drama, to music, anime and traditional Japanese items and collectibles.
- www.play-asia.com
PlayAsia focuses more on videogames and collectibles from China, Korea and Japan. They also carry movies, anime and music. They tend to mark their prices up a lot, but they are still worth a look!
- www.yesasia.com

Source Photo: Keiko Kitagawa

Dear Friends Photobook

*Published by KADOKAWA Group Publishing
Japan, 2007*

*Dear Friends is distributed by
Toei Co. Ltd, Japan ©2007*

Yes Asia specializes in all kinds of entertainment and electronics from all over Asia. I often check this website for other editions of Japanese movies and dramas that are cheaper.

Japanese drama has provided me with something different and in a way, brings me a little closer to Japan. I get so much fun out of it when I see major places and landmarks that I've been to before, because it always reminds me of my positive experiences there. Due to the maturity of the dramas as a result of the target audiences (teenagers and adults), it has also provided a way to help improve my Japanese language skills. In drama, no matter how serious or silly they get, there is always something for everyone to enjoy. It also gives us a better idea of what Japan is really like, beyond the cartoons, games and anime that we all know and love. If you don't already watch Japanese drama, I suggest that you should. I promise that you won't be disappointed ♥

