

Anime Expo Tokyo 2004: A California Convention Visits Japan

By Kat Avila

"I'm sorry. How do you spell your last name?" I asked, stalling for time (*giant sweat drop over head*), realizing I probably hadn't stopped writer Saki Hijiri, but some altogether different creature. Quickly glancing at the almost wholly Japanese business card he handed me, I made out the romanized name "Noboru Ishiguro" in small type.

Noboru Ishiguro is the president of Artland Animation Studio. He is also the veteran director of anime classics *Space Battleship Yamato* (a.k.a. *Star Blazers*, U.S.-censored version), *Macross* (a.k.a. *Robotech*, U.S.-censored version), groundbreaking OAV *Megazone 23*, and, one of my favorites, the epic space opera OAV series *Legend of the Galactic Heroes*. A frequent visitor to the United States, Noboru was most recently a guest of honor in 2002 at Katsucon in Baltimore, Maryland, and at the one-time Anime Expo New York.

Sigh. The first guest of honor I run into at Anime Expo Tokyo and an old-timer, and I mistook him for someone else. Kevin Lillard of *A Fan's View* web site would have recognized Noboru, but Kevin wasn't here. In retrospect, too bad I hadn't suggested Kevin's name be added to the wish list of American guests of honor. He is a tremendously sympathetic source of information on the American otaku (hard-core fan) scene, and the Japanese otaku would have benefited from his presence.



That's what AX Tokyo was for me; more than the globalization of the show-me storytelling forms of Japanese anime and manga (animation and comic books), it was about the excitement of seeing non-Japanese otaku mix it up with Japanese otaku in their own backyard, to create a new, albeit temporary community whose synergy would refresh both groups.

AX Tokyo was a modest-sized convention; an experimental extension of Anime Expo held every July 4th weekend in Southern California. It was a cooperative effort between the U.S.-based SPJA (Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation) and the Japanese Association for Science Fiction International Communication (JASFIC).

The convention was in the Tokyo district of Ikebukuro at a business, shopping, and entertainment complex known as Sunshine City, January 16-18, 2004. The convention was spread between the World Import Mart and Bunka Kaikan (Cultural Hall) buildings and three different floors, with several Sunday concerts at a nearby public hall. Average weekend attendance at AX Tokyo was about 2,000 people each day, with half that on Friday, which was a workday. About 300 of the 400 non-Japanese attendees were Americans.

American guests of honor at the Opening Ceremony were voice actor Crispin Freeman, cartoon writer David Wise, *Powerpuff Girls* comic book artist Philip Moy, and *Megatokyo* web comic creator Fred Gallagher. Sharing the stage with them were AX Tokyo chair Yukio Kikukawa, AX 2004 chair Jennifer Pon, Noboru Ishiguro, science fiction writer Saki Hijiri, and manga artist Hiroshi Aro. Dynamic anime song vocalist MIQ warmed up the crowd.

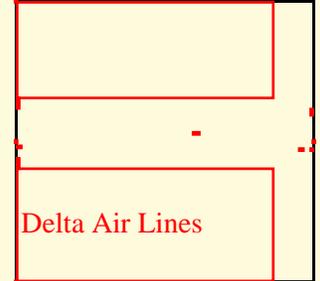
While scouting the premises, I met staff volunteers Rich Simental from Austin, Texas, and Ted Ekering from Victoria, Canada. Rich has attended Anime Expo since 1991, almost all of them as a volunteer. Ted has attended since 1992, but this year was his first as a volunteer. On the Japanese side, there was Takumi Honda, an art student at Nippon Engineering



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College who helped me decipher artist names (romanized in the less-used Kunrei, instead of Hepburn) at the Art Show. Later he showed me his manga layout boards in Artist Alley.

Showcasing the humor and artistry of the cosplayers was Saturday night's Masquerade. There were 13 entries. The winning entry was a parody of a comic Japanese TV commercial featuring Oscar and Andre (from Riyoko Ikeda's manga "The Rose of Versailles"). The runner-up award went to Ichiro Kubo in a one-eyed robot costume with a spider claw-like arm extension.



Said longtime Anime Expo staff member Lionel Lum, "The Masquerade cosplay performances went really well, and surprisingly got a very good reception from the packed audience. Masquerade was something really never tried on this level before [in Japan], so everyone was kinda nervous and skeptical. Very glad that it exceeded our expectations."

At AX Tokyo, Production I.G. introduced Mamoru Oshii's *Innocence: Ghost in the Shell*, as well as *Dead Leaves*, another animated movie set for release this year. Both movies signal a new wave of animation sweeping through Japan. *Innocence* opens in Japan on March 6. The release date abroad is not fixed yet.

On the manga side of things, one of the greatest training and testing grounds for artists has to be the biannual Comic Market (a.k.a. Comiket). Guest of honor and Comiket co-founder Yoshihiro Yonezawa showed a video of Comic Market 58 (August 2000) and talked about Comiket's history and influence. The first Comiket was held on December 21, 1975, at Toranomom Nihon Shobo Kaikan in Tokyo with 32 artist circles. It attracted no more than 700 people. Today about 35,000 artist circles and 500,000 attendees are supported by 2,000 staff volunteers during Comiket's three-day run in the summer and winter.

Yoshitaka Ishigami, in charge of Comiket's International Department, said, "Our ideal is to offer a place for young amateur artists to present their own manga. Personally I am interested to evangelize this wonderful artform offering freedom of expression in the world, and partly it has been accomplished already. I am very glad to see many foreign fans enjoying manga and anime at a place like Anime Expo Tokyo."

There were many reasons to be at Anime Expo Tokyo, but the best was the exchange of information and creative ideas between Japanese and non-Japanese otaku. To walk away from a convention inspired and in the mood to create something new - "I can do it better" - what more can an artist ask for after three days of anime, manga, panels, workshops, and Japanese culture.



Photos:

1. Sunshine City entrance
2. Orca-Style cosplay costume workshop
3. Japanese cosplayer Eiken (father) and Shinken as Dr. Tenma and Astro Boy
4. Ichiro Kubo's costume received a Masquerade runner-up award



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