

The Mike Toole Show The Shonen Jump Formula

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A couple of weeks back, I joined approximately half a million other anime dorks across the continent, who dutifully bought tickets and attended screenings of the new *My Hero Academia* movie. I've said several times in this column that I love going to see anime at the movies, and 2018's been a good year for doing this—between revivals of classics like the *Sailor Moon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* movies, and new hotness like *Mazinger Infinity* and *Maquia*, barely a month has gone by without at least one really good anime movie hitting a bunch of theatres from sea to shining sea. I particularly dig that most of the new-release films are thrown out within a month or two of their Japanese theatrical run—both fear of missing out and the temptation to pirate the Japanese home video release get tossed out the window with this approach.

While the *My Hero Academia* screenings proved to be bracingly popular (the suburban theatre I saw it at felt obliged to add three more screenings after the initial Tuesday evening show sold out; the additions all sold out, too!), reactions to the new film were a bit mixed. Most folks were, of course, delighted to see their favorites shine on the big screen, but there were also complaints about the film's empty dialogue and rote feel. I liked the movie alright, but I came in expecting formula—after all, *My Hero Academia: Two Heroes* was ultimately what I like to refer to as a *Shonen Jump* movie.

Shonen Jump movies are, as the term suggests, often movies based on properties that came from the *Shonen Jump* comics magazine. These films are usually brief—anywhere from thirty-five to ninety-five minutes. They feature a side-story that doesn't have much of an impact (if any) on the main, ongoing storyline. Characters experience a bonus gimmick, or encounter a special movie-only side character (in MHA's case, it's Melissa Shield). In short, these movies capitalize on the popularity of a series without disrupting that series' main storyline. Most of the *Dragon Ball Z*, *Naruto*, and *Bleach* movies are classic *Shonen Jump* movies. The *Ranma ½* and *InuYasha* movies are *Shonen Jump* movies, despite the fact that those series run in *Shonen Sunday*. The *Sailor Moon* movies? Gotta be *Shonen Jump* movies. Hell, *Fullmetal Alchemist* ran in *Shonen Gangan*, and its Sacred Star of Milos film, which does the 'outside continuity, and here's *Maaya Sakamoto* as the bonus character!' dance, is an obvious *Shonen Jump* movie!

If you stop and think about it, this formula's been around for decades. As for how it all got started, let's go back to the storied year of 1963, when TV anime was born. From the beginning, there were endeavors to get TV anime on the big screen—at first, it was simply *Toei* running an episode of *Ken the Wolf Boy* before screenings of their film *Doggie March*, the better to entice kids to tune in at home. 1964 saw *Tezuka Productions* producing their first theatrical film, *Astro Boy: Hero of Space*, which once again simply cut together several TV episodes—some of them with color footage!—for theatrical release. Meanwhile, *Toei* continued to experiment with running TV episodes in theatres, scheduling kids' matinee screenings of fare like *8th Man* and *Super Jetter* under the marquee title *Toei Manga Great March*.

These experiments did well enough that in 1966, *Toei* began a major departure from their typical approach to theatrical animated filmmaking. Previous works, like *Panda and the Magic Serpent* and *Little Prince and the Eight-Headed Dragon*, had all employed lavish, full animation, but for 1966's *Cyborg 009*, the studio would produce a film that, while still in eye-poppin' full color, was more visually similar to TV anime's limited animation. The movie also took liberties that set itself apart from the source comics, like turning one of the cyborgs into a little kid, the better to give kids watching in theatres a more relatable hero. This approach worked—the movie did well, and spurred new readers to check out the comics in the pages of *Weekly Shonen*, where the series had recently relocated. When it was time to make a new *Cyborg 009 movie*, *Monster War*, the studio ran that film ran as a double-feature with the somewhat more ambitious, delightfully weird *Jack and the Witch*, under the marquee title *Toei Children's Festival*.

Toei kept this approach up, pairing fare like *Puss n' Boots* and *The Flying Phantom Ship* with blown-up-for-theatres TV episodes of *Tiger Mask*, *Secret Akko-chan*, and *Ultra Seven*. Soon, this presentation, which tended to run seasonally, was branded the *Toei Manga Matsuri*. In 1973, they introduced another quirk to the festivities—in addition to first-run movies and big-screen presentations of TV episodes, the summer '73 *Manga Matsuri* included an original short movie called *Mazinger Z Vs. Devilman*. Not only did this featurette depict an astonishing team-up between two very different heroes, it presented an all-new story, totally outside the main continuities of either *Mazinger Z* or *Devilman*. History was made again at the summer 1975 *Manga Matsuri*, when *Toei* revealed an exciting short film called *War of the Flying Saucers*—a film that was the prototype for that winter's *Grendizer TV* series! Clearly, the pop culture power of the *Manga Matsuri* was formidable.

As you can see above, don't let anyone tell you different—*Spider-Man*'s most original and exciting silver-screen appearance isn't that movie coming out later this year, it's 1978's *Manga Matsuri*! This edition also featured *Captain Harlock: Mystery of the Arcadia*, a reframing of the concurrent TV show's episode 13 with some new animation. *Toei* would also use the *Manga Matsuri* to jump on the bandwagon of other pop culture phenomena, using the festival to spotlight competing pop culture products like *Pink Lady*, and *Space Battleship Yamato*. Hell, in 1980, the festival's summer installment featured a revival screening of *Snow White*. Hey, I love that anime!

The 1980s versions of *Toei*'s *Manga Matsuri* kept on inching toward creating original content for theatres; the 1981 edition might've touted a revival of *101 Dalmatians*, but it also featured *Dr. Slump: Hello, Wonderland*, a short film made exclusively for theatrical showings. By 1985 the festival featured original short movies starring *Kinnikuman* and *Captain Tsubasa* as well, and the winter 1986 *Manga Matsuri* had as its headliner an all-new all-original *Dragon Ball* movie, featuring a retelling of *Goku*'s first meeting with *Bulma* and a special movie-only character, *Pansy*. More than anything previously released, this film, which we know as *Curse of the Blood Rubies*, was probably the crystallization of the whole *Shonen Jump* movie format.

The reason I keep gabbing on about *Shonen Jump* isn't just because most of these *Toei* films were based on *Shonen Jump* properties. Starting in 1985, the manga giant got into the film festival act themselves, creating Jump Tour '85, a special event that featured pilot movies of their hit series *Kimagure Orange Road* and *Kochikame*. *Toei*'s Manga Matsuri eventually faded, first rebranding as the *Toei Anime Fair* in 1990, where it would spend the next decade acting as a reliable launchpad for the many *Dragon Ball Z* movies. The final regular *Toei Anime Fair* in 2002 touted a triple-feature of *Ultimate Muscle*, *Digimon Frontier*, and *Crush Gear Turbo* movies. But the decline of *Toei*'s big-screen event created space for *Shonen Jump* to step in—while the manga label did several Jump Tour events throughout the 90s, debuting new animated featurettes of popular manga hits like *Ninku*, *Hunter X Hunter*, and *One Piece*, they didn't start regularly booking theatrical events until 2002, coinciding with the final *Toei Anime Fair*.

Of course, in the meantime, there were plenty of other movies that utilized the now-proven formula of doing a neat retelling or side-story featuring original guest characters. *Saint Seiya* did it, *Yū Yū Hakusho* did it... hell, you could even argue that *Escaflowne* did it. *Detective Conan* even made their annual original movie a theatrical event that remains a predictable box office powerhouse to this day. But *Shonen Jump* used their theatrical event, usually called the Jump Super Anime Tour, to create a number of really neat spectacles—along with using the festival to debut anime versions of popular shows like *Naruto* and *Prince of Tennis*, they created holiday-themed episodes, screened pilots of fare like Yin-Yang Battle, and even created a special anime version of *Romance Dawn*, *Eiichiro Oda*'s one-shot manga prototype for *One Piece*. The same 2008 edition of the tour even featured a return to anime for the *Dragon Ball Z* gang, several years before they'd return more definitively in the *Battle of Gods* film.

Shonen Jump doesn't run the Super Anime Tour every year, but they do run *Jump Festa* every winter, an expo-like event with pavilions showcasing their various hits. There's anime programming at *Jump Festa*, but it's not a mini-film festival in the same manner that the Super Anime Tour or *Toei*'s Manga Matsuri were. Nonetheless, the *Shonen Jump* formula lives on, in the constant flood of films featuring the likes of *One Piece*, *Dragon Ball Z*, and *Naruto*—excuse me, now it's *Boruto*. This formula persists because it works—in my list of 100 great anime movies from last year, there are several notable examples, like the *Heartcatch Precure!* movie, *Crayon Shin-chan: The Adult Empire Strikes Back*, and the first *Ranma 1/2* movie.

If this formula is so obvious, then why do we keep falling for it? It can't just be because these movies provide the simple chance to visit the characters and universe again—if that were true, they'd probably make *Star Wars* movies every ye—wait a minute, bad example. For me, the best *Shonen Jump* movies bring something new to the table, even as they stick to the formula. One of my old faves, for example, is the *Marmalade Boy* movie. It's a brief, one-and-done affair that features a story of would-be teen couple Miki and Yuu having a weird little adventure before they actually meet up in the main continuity of the series. It's sweet, enjoyably dumb, and has a great recurring *Gatchaman* gag.

A better example of why the *Shonen Jump* formula works might be *Saint Seiya: Heated Battle of the Gods*, which is actually the second *Saint Seiya* movie. This film involves Seiya and the rest of the Bronze Saints paying a visit to Asgard, where they must confront and battle an entertainingly twisted, shonen battle-flavored version of the Norse pantheon. Not only is this a brisk film filled with cool fight scenes, it was compelling enough for *Toei* to add an entire Asgard saga, which did not appear in the manga, to the TV anime adaptation. The film's cosmos exploded powerfully enough to influence the rest of the *Saint Seiya* media!

As for a more recent example of a quality *Shonen Jump* movie, I'm tempted to pick *One Piece: GOLD*, which has more extravagant fights and a more entertaining, topical antagonist than the similarly crowd-pleasing *Strong World* and *Film Z*—but I think my actual favorite recent *Shonen Jump* movie is *Hunter X Hunter: Phantom Rouge*. I'm a big fan of both the HxH anime and manga, and while I don't think that *Phantom Rouge* is a truly great film, it really delivers on its central premise of bringing back the entire Phantom Troupe—even the dead ones—for an all-out battle with both good guys and bad guys. The Troupe's members are some of the *franchise's* most popular characters, despite appearing only occasionally, and are one of the medium's best examples of villains that you kinda root for. I'm waiting patiently for *Viz* to cough up *The Last Mission*, the second recent *Hunter X Hunter* movie, to see how that one stacks up.

Despite enjoying myself in the theater—really, if you're at a sold-out showing with a rowdy crowd of like-minded dorks, you can make anything more fun-- I don't think that *My Hero Academia: Two Heroes* is a particularly great example of the *Shonen Jump* formula. Melissa Shield is a really fun character, which just irritates me because we probably won't see much of her in the TV series. (That door is open, though, because her dad David is part of the main series canon.) But most of MHA's large, vibrant cast don't get to do all that much except put on some formalwear; when Deku and/or All Might aren't fighting the bad guys, there's a whole lot of talking and planning and walking around and more talking. Some *Shonen Jump* movies thrive on being accessible and brisk, but the MHA movie feels like a true-fans-only affair to me. What's your favorite *Shonen Jump* movie? Is it a classic, like one of the *Dragon Ball Z* or *Urusei Yatsura* movies? Or is it something more recent, like *Fairy Tail: Dragon Cry* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!: The Dark Side of Dimensions*? Let your fellow readers know in the comments; I'll see you at the movies.