

r/anime 2022 awards – Drama
NOMINEE WRITEUPS
Gippy

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Nominee writeup: **Aoashi**

When a show is announced as an adaptation, the one thing fans pray for is that it remains faithful to the source. But each medium has its strengths and weaknesses. Manga is able to extend events that would otherwise unfold quickly in real time with internal thoughts and analysis. Spoken dialogue can be used with the expectation that other things are happening at the same time. By slowing a scene down and embellishing it with visuals and text, multiple pages of a manga could represent under a minute of real time. Soccer (association football) is a real time sport, and so a proper anime adaptation of any soccer manga would need to keep this in mind.

Unfortunately, this show didn't do that with its games. Gameplay consistently grinded to a halt. Players on both sides engaged in long-winded talk as everyone else stood and watched. Soccer is a sport where everyone moves around, but everyone without the ball was represented with stills. As animating the field from a wide angle would require a tremendous amount of animation effort, the cinematography was limited to close-up shots. This made the soccer games difficult to follow. It was especially glaring as Aoi's special ability was to visualize the entire field, and so the viewer isn't able to see what he sees. An anime should be able to make a soccer game look more fun and exciting than its real life counterpart, but this show failed to do that. Due to all of the non-organic play stoppages as a result of in-game dialogue, I was never invested in any of the games. The final game took a whopping four episodes to complete due to all of the padding. I don't know how this show could've made the soccer interesting without making drastic changes from the manga, but some creative license was sorely needed, like how it was done in *Demon Slayer* or *Bocchi the Rock*.

The show outside of the soccer games was more digestible. Aoi was a brash leader that I could root for, especially after how he was doing it all for his mother. Soon he was humbled at the end of the first cour when the coaches deem him to not have the body type or skill to be a professional forward. After initially thinking that he should be the center of any offensive scheme, he quickly learned that he had much to learn about the game and needed to put in the extra effort to be a good defensive player. However, his teammates and various opponents lacked the same sort of development. A number of Aoi's teammates were never named, nor did Aoi interact with them, such as the goalkeeper and the token black guy. Most of the opponents that Aoi faced were theatrical bullies who belittled Aoi's skills. They all had menacing facial features, as though the show needed to emphasize that hey look, this is a bad guy and you're supposed to hate him!

Perhaps my mixed reaction was inevitable due to its subject matter being a real time sport, rather than a sport with many stoppages in play such as baseball. It needed a monumental creative vision to transform the source into something special. The writing outside of anything involving gameplay was good, especially at the midpoint where Aoi learned he wasn't cut out to be a forward. But as a show that emphasized soccer gameplay, it didn't take advantage of the anime medium due to its insistence of trying to be a straightforward 1:1 manga adaptation.

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Nominee writeup: **Ascendance of a Bookworm S3**

In S1, Myne used her Earth knowledge to become an accomplished inventor in a feudal world, which caught the eye of the upper class. It exuded hope and encouragement that Myne's tenacity and resourcefulness would change the world for the better. But the tone of the show changed in S2 and S3. No longer was it a cute show about a happy girl introducing new technology to a grateful public. Instead, it focused on the grim reality of feudalism's social class division.

Unlike other overpowered isekai main characters, Myne lacked the fortitude to make sweeping societal reforms in this world. It was depressing to see her accept the system for what it was and only have the ability to make small-scale changes. She helped the orphaned children out of their plight, but only because she gave them the option to work for her or die. While it was much better than their current situation, it wasn't true freedom. She and the high priest Ferdinand made the decision to intentionally delay the development of the printing press, as they were concerned about what could happen if the commoners became literate.

I had hoped that the antagonists of this show were complex characters with understandable reasons as to why they felt they were above the commoners. Instead, they came off as Saturday morning cartoon villains. The nobility hated Myne for no real reason other than she was a commoner, despite all of the potential she brought to the table. Their ugly character designs obviously made them out to look like corrupt, evil people. The bishop had zero development ever since Myne embarrassed him in S1, and just held a childish grudge. Still, up until the last two episodes, it felt like there were only a few bad apples that were out to get Myne. Ferdinand's frequent heart-to-heart conversations with Myne solidified him as a powerful ally, and were easily the best parts of the show. I thought Ferdinand's wisdom, coupled with the latent magic power of Myne, would be a powerful combination that could solve the season's conflict brilliantly.

However, the last two episodes completed the show's descent into darkness. Myne was tricked into using a charm that legally changed who her father was. Then to top it off, her family was forced into sign what was essentially a disownment contract upon threat of execution. Watching everyone resign their fates to the system made me angry. I was angry at how Myne's father was powerless to stop any of it. I was angry at Myne and Ferdinand, as they had the power to fight the system, but they also chose to submit. And I was especially angry at Sylvester the Archduke, whose playful personality in the previous episodes was a façade. Instead, he showed he was just like all of the other nobles by executing almost everyone associated with the bishop, and proclaiming that he considered destroying Myne's workshop and executing her family. Delia was spared, but put under permanent house arrest for life. The other female retainers of the bishop were all executed. These final scenes left such a bitter taste in my mouth that it overpowered the positivity I had for the first eight episodes. It's not that I dislike bad endings, it's just that nobody put up any resistance whatsoever. In the end, I felt like the main characters themselves: utterly defeated.

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Nominee writeup: **Case Study of Vanitas S2**

With a wealth of backstory exposition and lengthy flashbacks, this season of *Vanitas* looked to play the long game by opening up new characters and threads. However, it didn't resolve any significant ones that were introduced in the first season. The entire second season almost felt like filler. Chloé and Jean-Jacques Chastel didn't seem to factor into the larger picture after their arc ended. The flashbacks of Astolfo, Mikhail, Dominique, and Jeanne gave some insight into who they currently are, but unlike the shortlisted show *Build Divide*, what we learned didn't convert well into their actions this season. They felt they had tragic backstories for the sake of them. Astolfo's loss of family in his flashback didn't explain his short temper and why he murdered random soldiers. Dominique's loss of his brother didn't explain why she suddenly became Mikhail's lapdog. The beings behind the curses were still shrouded in mystery.

Vanitas was an unlikable protagonist. He handled everyone in a toxic manner, especially Jeanne, and I felt the Noé/*Vanitas* team was insufferable. Noé regressed into more of a sidekick role in S2, and this heavily impacted my enjoyment of the latter arc. I disagree with the other jurors in that *Vanitas* has chemistry with the rest of the cast. He was abrasive to all of them, and they only followed him because it was in their best interests to do so. There were forced chibi scenes in an attempt to make the interactions cuter. Outside of slice-of-life or comedy shows, I'm not a fan of this style at all, and to me, it represents poor writing. This show used the chibi scenes frequently, more so than contemporaries like *Demon Slayer*. The second half of S2 toned it down due to the heavy flashbacks, but the chibi scenes were still used at the very end to conclude the arc.

I'm not sensitive to bloody messes, but I thought the blood here was gratuitously pointless. Every fight ended up having blood on someone's face, and it felt like the "injuries" during the fights were meaningless, given how vampires have enhanced regeneration ability anyway. I don't know why it kept doing this blood-on-face thing, other than it's some sort of fetish for the viewers. Maybe I'm making too much of a deal about this, but fights should matter and should be well thought out. For the second arc, I couldn't care much about Noé and *Vanitas* fighting each other. I knew that the show wouldn't have had the courage to kill off either of them anyway, as it has played chicken with every other main character.

Compared to all of the other nominated entries, *Vanitas S2* felt incomplete. For the nominations that have a further story to tell, such as *Aoashi*, *Ascendance of a Bookworm*, and *Legend of the Galactic Heroes DNT*, those all ended at a major plot progression point that permanently affected the outlook of the major characters. *Vanitas S2* had a filler arc with a random vampire couple, Dominique standing on top of a Ferris wheel, and Mikhail running away because *Vanitas* wouldn't work with him. It felt like it had much less substance than S1. As a result, I felt this was an entry the public propped up only due to S1 and source manga lovers.

r/anime 2022 awards – Drama Nominee writeup: **Estab Life**

Arguably the most ambitious nominee, this show brought with it the challenge of creating a believable world where its inhabitants were segregated into their own communities. The first five episodes were episodic and established the cluster variety. Each one was an allegory of a system of government. While the show could have reflected on this at a deeper level like *Ascendance of a Bookworm* did with feudalism, instead it went for over-the-top craziness in order to establish that this, indeed, was not a typical normal world.

The extraction chase scenes wore out their welcome fast. It was cheesy in episode 1, and I was rolling my eyes when it happened again in episode 2. Later on, it's sort of explained how everyone is able to survive each time: Equa's "fatal luck" ability allowed her to see a hypothetical future a few seconds ahead, allowing her to dodge any unfavorable outcome. Feles could summon magic barriers that deflect bullets, and the rest could withstand more damage than usual. However, because the show demonstrated that the team was virtually impervious, the chase scenes lacked any sort of suspense and seemed almost comical.

I felt this show significantly improved in the second half. It began to explore extractions that weren't as routine. Episodes 6 (the otaku) and 8 (the moderator) didn't result in a successful extraction. Putting Equa out of the spotlight in episodes 6-7 was a great way to add some extra development to the cast. This solidified the team as a very likable group who have their own character dynamics with each other, rather than only just interacting with the leader.

Episode 9 (the jailbreak) was the only miss in the second half, as it reverted back to zany antics, but the show ended with a deeper 3-episode arc that explained everything about Mr. M and the clusters. While it didn't veer too much into heavy drama as I would have liked, it blended its dramatic elements with a decent balance of action and mystery. It even touched on a bit of slice-of-life with a cozy episode 7. Perhaps it wrapped up a little too cleanly, as the team was back in business by the end of the show due to the system reboot.

The question remains whether the entire cluster system should've been revamped at the end. While rebooting the system and reverting back to the status quo kept the team intact, it made for a somewhat questionable ending. Similar to *Ascendance of a Bookworm S3*, I wanted the status quo to be challenged and changed, and the world reformed. The show's key revelation, that a utopia based on diversity fell apart after one generation, was something that could have been shown and not just explained. This show just ran out of time to consider the idea of the world being reunited again, and went back to the clustered world. While what it presented was satisfying enough, I wonder what this story could've been had it taken itself more seriously. The episodic content in the first half could've been drastically reduced, allowing for a much longer and deeper exploration of the revelations presented in the final episode.

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Nominee writeup: **Fortune Favors Lady Nikuko**

The summary of Nikuko's life at the beginning of the movie set the tone immediately. Nikuko, who is obese, was represented as a brown blob and chomped on food multiple times. She went through three boyfriends, and all three ditched her, costing her financially each time. And each time she rebounded and took on another low-skill job. The flashback ended and we're moved to the present, as Nikuko prepared the start of the day with the shot focused on the unusually large amount of butter she was using for her morning toast. This continuous focus on her gluttony was a warning signal, but I had hope that that the movie could maturely address this.

I am a fan of flawed characters done correctly. Flaws are important, as unique individuals are a good reason for any story to exist. Luou in *Dance Dance Danseur* was a heavily flawed person, and he did certain questionable actions. But even if the viewer dislikes him for his actions, his story was framed in a way that you could understand why he did such actions. This movie, on the other hand, never attempted to reflect on or address Nikuko's flaws. Instead, Nikuko was trotted out like a freak attraction. Several cooking scenes did nothing but allow her to eat up, especially fatty meat cuts. Kiku repeatedly criticized Nikuko's personality and actions in her internal monologue. But Nikuko remained positive and acted in a childlike demeanor throughout everything.

The unsettling sports festival scene in particular was reprehensible. Nikuko was the only overweight person at the meet, and she predictably struggled, much to the delight of the crowd, as seen by their amused faces. Perhaps it was trying to come off as comedic, as many anime have often poked fun at unathletic characters trying to do sports. However, given how the narrative had already framed Nikuko as a very unfortunate person, this scene crossed the line from funny to sheer pity. And Nikuko was oblivious to it all. There are shows with extreme graphic content, but for the most part I can accept what is being shown because it makes artistic or narrative sense, or it is aiming to arouse. However, this scene was a deliberate display of fat shaming with no plot implications, and the movie passed it off as socially acceptable. In my initial viewing, I nearly walked out of the theater after seeing this, and I regret not bringing this up in the initial discussion.

The end reveal of Kiku being abandoned by her biological mother was one last chilling scene. It was yet another person taking advantage of Nikuko's kindness. Watching Nikuko cry and insist that her ex-friend was a good person was a gut punch, as it made clear that Nikuko remained blissfully ignorant. Perhaps it's only a matter of time until Kiku abandons Nikuko, too.

This movie was a clown show in which Nikuko, which literally translates to 'meat lady', was the clown, and she was repeatedly mocked over and over. Other jurors will focus on what they feel are the positive aspects of the movie, and I will absolutely respect their views. But for me, the negative portrayal of Nikuko was so offensive that I felt the movie had no redeeming value when I left the theater. 7 months and 1 rewatch later, I still feel that way.

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Nominee writeup: **Legend of the Galactic Heroes DNT S3/S4**

Fresh off public sentiment being swayed to Reinhard after he did nothing to stop an entire planet from being nuked, the Galactic Empire ramped up the offensive against the Free Planets Alliance, as Kircheis was no longer at Reinhard's side as his moral compass. Much of this show tackles the idea of two political ideals at odds with each other: benevolent autocracy versus democracy. Yang's inquiry at the beginning of S3 indicated that those who had authority over Yang were still distrustful of him despite Yang proving his loyalty over and over. The Galactic Empire's chain of command with Reinhard at the top was a more cohesive unit. Favorable scenes of Ruenthal and Mittermayer, contrasted against the corrupt Fezzan officials, makes you think that perhaps the galaxy would be better off under one ruling banner after all.

While this show presented an interesting political drama that has almost no equivalency in the anime medium, it is still a huge stretch to consider that such a premise could actually happen. Anytime that a war is depicted using a structure that alludes to past human history, I have to step back and wonder about the actual motives. Why does the Galactic Empire want to take over the whole inhabited galaxy in the first place instead of letting the FPA be, other than Reinhard wanting to control them? While this show depicted all sorts of military coups and corrupt officials, by the end of S4 it still didn't make it very believable that millions, and potentially billions, would die for any sort of intergalactic war.

But let's assume the viewer has completely bought into the concept that one man is trying to conquer the galaxy, who has billions willing to die for that cause instead of attempting continuous diplomacy, and ignored the questionable logistics of an intergalactic supply chain. S3 featured the most bombastic battle thus far in the story, with a mobile space station resembling a Death Star on each side. The spectacle of two "Death Stars" firing lasers at each other is at least given a proper amount of setup. The CG was remarkably improved from S1 and S2, and the lighting and shadowing was dynamic enough to almost fool you into thinking you were watching HDR. However, the tactics used in this battle, such as the FPA using a pincer attack, were still out of a two-dimensional playbook, rather than being imaginative with the three dimensions of space.

The focus on the political aspects of space conquest, as supposed to other simpler science fiction anime with fantasy elements like *Knights of Sidonia*, or even live-action spectacles with aliens like *Avatar* or *Star Wars*, is a bit of a backfire. I felt that this show would have been more believable if it had taken place on Earth with conventional warfare. If other premises such as romantic dramas may be critiqued based on how human interaction affects the story, then the same should be applied for this show, just on a completely different magnitude of scale. I could believe Yang having his typical laissez-faire everyman attitude if he was just commanding a small battalion. But as a commander controlling the lives of millions, I felt his character belittled the real atrocities of war. While compelling, this show requires a leap of faith in order to be fully absorbed in it.

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Nominee writeup: **Revue Starlight Movie**

The TV show that preceded this movie asked a lot from the viewer in its portrayal of a hybrid fantasy-reality world. Rather than a more grounded presentation of the arts like in *Kageki Shoujo*, the TV show featured a sociopathic giraffe that pitted the students against each other in some underground revue tournament for his own bizarre form of entertainment. What I wanted was for the students to realize what a horrific ordeal they're being put through and take down the giraffe. Instead, the students completely bought into this absurdity and we were treated to a number of obtuse, abstract performances that had little symbolic reasoning to them. One of the students, Nana, had looped time over and over to re-live her victory, but this was handled in such a sloppy matter that Hikari was able to defeat her in a single attempt. The system remained in place, and the movie fast forwarded a year later, in which the cast are now all seniors.

With a mixed taste in my mouth after the TV show, I went into the movie with an open mind, thinking that it would work on its weaknesses. Instead, it fully embraced the absurdity and turned things up to eleven. The giraffe was back, and this time he could transform into a fruit salad and dish out tomato juice, which represented blood. The revues were all contrived from the fact that each pair had chosen different futures after high school. The TV show had some semblance of framing in that the students were all initially trying to be the "glimmer" or leading star of their stage play. Upon rewatching the movie, I understood that the student pairs had some unfinished business with each other. There was no mention of the seniors helping out the juniors to hold whatever play they were producing this year, and the underground revue system was still in place.

The first half of the movie featured a lengthy flashback of Karen and Hikari's childhood, and how they both ended up aiming for the stage. I didn't find Hikari to be a very compelling or sympathetic character, as she was the stereotypical cool girl who put her career prospects above everything. She left Karen to have a superior acting upbringing in London. She then returned to Japan to keep her promise with Karen, but was about to leave for London for good after high school. Hikari's victory over Karen in the final revue at the end of the movie made me feel relieved for Karen, as Karen could finally move on from the silly childhood promise that had dictated her life.

On a production level, this looks very slick during the revues, with dynamic lighting effects and camera angles. But the plot, in which various student pairs are all going their separate ways and will duel one last time, was just a paper-thin reason to hold the revues. In essence, the spectacle of the revues was just a form of fanservice. By removing any sort of cohesive plot, the movie could dazzle the viewer with consecutive revues in the second half of the movie. But as the TV show had failed to get me on board for most of the students, I couldn't have cared less about the revues or their outcomes. It was like watching multiple boss fights without any context as to why the viewer should care about the stakes at hand. It was the epitomization of style over substance.

r/anime 2022 awards – Drama Nominee writeup: **Shine Post**

Idol anime have typically been all about presenting a group of girls, each one with a particular quirk or ideal that charms the fanbase, causing each fan to choose a “best girl” of the group. These character properties can be summed up in a few sentences, and each girl oozes a positive, bubbly personality. This show deviated from that formula by having each girl with their own complex issues hiding beneath a positive façade.

The character development of each girl was remarkable, and beyond the one-episode surface-level drama found in many idol shows. Kyouka and Rio had 2-episode development arcs to deal with their inner demons. Though the ultimate resolution was the same for both of them in that they sang as the center for their signature songs, how they regained that level of self-confidence was different enough that I didn’t feel like I was watching a repeat. Kyouka was frustrated by her lack of natural charisma, and felt that even hard work couldn’t make up for on-stage jitters. Her newfound confidence carried over into Rio’s arc and the rest of the show, which was nice to see because it felt like the group was showing real improvement and growth. As for Rio, the manager focused on her strengths and gave her a ballad. I loved this resolution because it would’ve been unrealistic for Rio to significantly improve her dancing in such a short amount of time.

Haru’s arc was intertwined with Yukimoji’s arc and was handled in a unique way. Instead of seeing what was happening through Haru’s eyes herself, we saw everything through the other girls as they pieced together Haru’s past. Though the opening sequence spoiled that the two Yukimoji girls would eventually be part of TINGS, I was still somewhat surprised at the revelation that they had originally left due to internal strife. In hindsight, the hints were there, given that Yukimoji seemed to care a little too much about how TINGS was progressing. Haru having the most natural talent of the group, which led to the Yukimoji split, was indicative of how people react differently given the same situations. Haru trying her best had made her best friend upset, so she thought holding back for TINGS would prevent her from experiencing that again. However, that was what led to the current drama, where Haru indirectly didn’t trust her groupmates enough. I thought the resolution where they just all talked it out to clear the air was excellent, as everyone realized that holding back information was what caused everything to snowball.

To my relief, the show didn’t use the manager’s gimmick as a crutch to magically solve issues. As for the songs themselves, I didn’t think they were anything special or catchy. But because there wasn’t an insert song shoved into every episode like various other idol anime, this show had more time to do what it did best: crafting a believable story that cared greatly about its characters. Many shows, idol anime in particular, have a problem where most of the members aren’t developed and end up being forgettable. But this show was able to properly highlight all five TINGS members, and the idea of making two of them pseudo-antagonists for half of the show was brilliant.