

Revolutionary Girl Utena

Written by Brian Auriti

Basic Premise

Do you know? Do you know? I wonder if you know! At rose-blanketed Ohtori Academy, Utena Tenjou seeks the noble prince she remembers from her childhood. But what she finds is something much darker -- secret duels conducted by the shadowy Student Council over "the power to revolutionize the world." At the center of the duels is a student named Anthy Himemiya, the "Rose Bride" who is the trophy of the Champion Duelist. She is said to be a doll who has no will apart from what the Champion wills her to do, but Utena cries foul. Utena joins the duels in the name of friendship, but quickly finds herself entangled in a web of intrigue beyond her imagination. What is world revolution? Why is Anthy so important? And who is pulling the strings? Come and find out...

Reviews

Similar Anime: Rose of Versailles, Brother, Dear Brother (the latter by repute; this author is unfamiliar with it)

Dissimilar Anime: Sailor Moon, in spite of sharing director Kunihiko Ikuhara

Main Characters

Utena Tenjou: Naive and idealistic young girl who has vowed to become a prince

Anthy Himemiya: The duels' trophy, said to be a mere puppet of the Champion Duelist

Touga Kiryuu: President of the Student Council; promiscuous, chivalrous, and secretive

Kyouichi Saionji: Angsty vice president of the Student Council and current Champion Duelist

Miki Kaoru: Student Council secretary; kind, smart, and the talk of the girls

Juri Arisugawa: Student Council PR officer and iron fist; distant and prone to depression

Nanami Kiryuu: Touga's adoring and annoying little sister, who bears him lots of... love

A few other major characters emerge in later seasons.

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For drama, symbolism, and nuanced exploration of cause, effect, and inertia in human relationships, Utena is hard to beat. As the threads of the plot ravel and unravel in unpredictable patterns, they weave the identities of the major characters -- especially our leads, Utena and Anthy -- lovingly and often heartrendingly. Utena is described by some as a feminist work and by others as a homoerotic one, but in fact the show does not limit itself to these topics. Friendship in general becomes a major theme, but not after the hackneyed mold of Sailor Moon or the tightly circumscribed mold of Ghost in the Shell. Friendships in Utena range from the unspoken to the giddy, from the altruistic to the masochistic, from those based in memory of what once was to those based in hope for what might yet be, and all are explored and contrasted. Relationships that seem similar on their face may carry deep undercurrents that make them polar opposites underneath.

None of this is to say that Utena is an art-school film that undoubtedly holds some kind of lesson about humanity if you can just stifle the yawns. It is also a whopping good yarn, dramatic and well-paced, that holds your attention from beginning to end and does not deteriorate during its 39 episodes. The duels, so central to the plot, brim with energy and intensity, backed by a kind of "choral rock" that brings urgency to the bouts. The show's apocalyptic signature song, "Zettai Unmei Mokushiroku," plays during Utena's frequent ascents to the dueling arena and becomes almost ritual. Songs and visuals are packed with symbolism, yet it is possible to watch and enjoy Utena without giving symbolism a thought; the symbols are there for the willing audience to explore.

The show benefits from the fact that director Kunihiro Ikuhara, notorious for his close collaboration with Naoko Takeuchi on Sailor Moon, is a known maniac. Utena is the result of him being given a moderate budget and being told to go to town. Other anime, such as Paranoia Agent, also manage to successfully plumb the human psyche

without sacrificing drama, but Ikuhara could not settle for an anime without eye candy in every corner (co-creator Chiho Saito, director of *Rose of Versailles*, reports that he was very particular about having uniform buttons placed exactly on the female characters' breasts). As a result, *Utena* is an anime with humanity and maximum color saturation, putting it in a very elite group indeed and helping to give it its wholly unique character.