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Directing Dubs: David Wald talks directing Hitorijime My Hero and LGBTQ+ anime



by Victoria Davis 2 weeks ago

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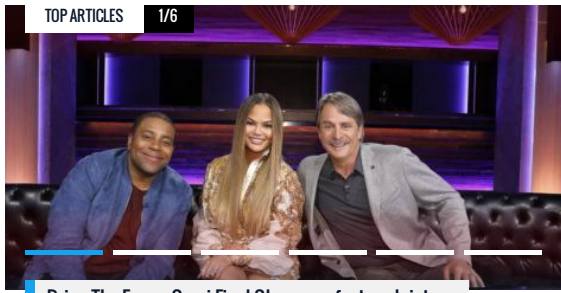


COMMENT

LGBTQ+ voice actor and English dub director David Wald is working to bring queer anime to English audiences. Wald talked with Hidden Remote about his Pride projects Hitorijime My Hero, Love Stage!! and Bloom Into You.

Since the 80s and early 90s, Japanese animation has unapologetically spotlighted LGBTQ+ stories, beginning with shows like *Song of Wind and Trees*, *Cardcaptor Sakura*, *Zetsuai 1989*, *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, and even *Sailor Moon*. For many years, English dub studios have wrestled with taking the gamble on bringing these stories to English audiences. But voice actor David Wald took the plunge this year, directing queer romance anime titles *Hitorijime My Hero*, *Love Stage!!*, and *Bloom Into You*.

Wald has been voice acting for anime since 2006. But this year, he has very quickly become a **pioneer for "Tribe Anime,"** as he likes to call it, speaking at LGBTQ+ anime **panels and expos** across the country, directing three queer anime romances this year alone and having an inspiring impact on young viewers. It's all part of, what he refers to as, "my Big Glittery Gay Mission" to share the authentic queer experience with English anime fans as well as members of the Rainbow Tribe who may have yet to discover their love of anime.



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It was the 80s when Wald himself says he was contending with being a young member of the Tribe. He says that while there were no heroes in the western genre that were celebrated, outside of those in the role for a "cheap laugh," Wald did find his heroes while binge-watching *Love Stage!!* and *Hitorijime My Hero*, unofficially renamed "*My Hero Acagaymia*" by Wald.

Now, having given those characters voices in English, Wald aims to expand the audience and acceptance of the queer anime genre's with the hope that other members of the Tribe can find heroes in the shows as well. Hidden Remote interviewed Wald about some of his early LGBTQ+ anime roles, working with Sentai Filmworks to make his dream a reality and finding the right actors to voice these groundbreaking characters.



Hidden Remote: You're well-known these days in the voice acting world as a pioneer for queer anime. But did that career path come as a surprise? How soon was it after you started working in anime that you began taking on LGBTQ+ projects? Did you go after those roles right away?

David Wald: When I first got into anime, I did not come into it with the perspective of a fan. I had seen very little anime at all outside of *Speed Racer* and *Battle of the Planets*. So the presence of queer stories in anime had never occurred to me because I seldom, if ever, saw them in the booth. We generally don't dub those things. But I don't think it's because of any level of homophobia. I think it's just because the anime industry at large considered those titles to be of a narrow appeal and saw perusing those shows as a bit of a gamble.

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But my contention has always been that there are a lot of members of the Tribe beyond existing anime fandom who would really be glad to know this stuff exists. It's said that 15-20 percent of

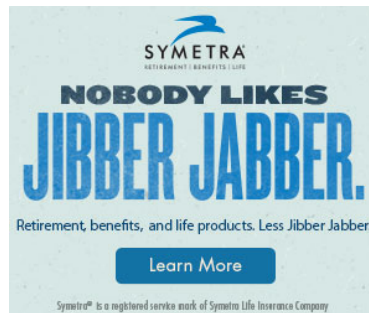
the population prescribes to one color or another on the rainbow flag and that outnumbers the existing anime audience by several multiples. But industry folk don't like gambling.



Hidden Remote: But you still managed to pull for those shows early on in your career, like while working on *Akame ga Kill*.

Wald: Yes, I got to play Bulat in *Akame ga Kill* and this is a character who is gay. It's candid. It's in the manga. It's not hidden. For the first time in my life, in any narrative ever, I was looking at a gay character and allowed to actually portray a gay character, whose homosexuality wasn't their singular contribution to the narrative. I was completely blown away by that and very quickly started asking around about other queer anime and started watching some other titles. I started to see that there were quality, queer-positive portrayals peppered all throughout anime.

Hidden Remote: *Love Stage!!*, which you actually directed, seems to draw from that idea of gay characters being so much more than just gay characters. The two main protagonists, Izumi and Ryouma, are people that viewers of all genders and walks of life could possibly relate to.



Wald: I totally agree. The story is a universal struggle. It wasn't a coming-out story, it's a story about overcoming initial rejection which is every romance ever! What I think is also so interesting about it is, when you have romance storytelling that's your old hetero-romance, there are given parameters. There are things we assume to be the case, certain rules that must be followed in a hetero-romance—the assertive, bumbling, clumsy male trying to win the heart of the elegant and too-good-for-him female.

But when you get into a romance that features two boys, or two girls, those parameters are gone, all of those rules are liquid. So you can find relationships in Yaoi and Yuri that are incredibly complex because we don't understand the rules as well in that kind of romance. But a romance like *Love Stage!!* or *Bloom Into You* can still speak to anyone because it's talking about a universal experience.



Hidden Remote: It's interesting that anime has been on this LGBTQ+ storytelling train since the 90s and early 2000s with *Sukisho*, *Gravitation* and *Junjou Romantica*, where western

Hollywood is now just starting to turn that corner. When you first grabbed on to LGBTQ+ anime as an actor and director, did you realize the potential that this had?

Wald: Right away. I realized it with *Bulat* and, in fact, I wanted to make a big deal out of it. At that point, I was going to Sentai Filmworks and saying, "Please let me go out and talk about how important this is." That's when I started to do a deep dive to find the really good material.

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Hidden Remote: *And that's when you found Love Stage!!.*

Wald: I found that show to be extraordinary for so many reasons. I had binged the entire show in one night and only after which did I go looking up information about it. Who maybe had the licence? Where is this show now? I then found out that Sentai had the licence. I started beating down their door the next day.

Hidden Remote: *But funnily enough, you directed Hitorijime My Hero before Love Stage!! hit the ground running?*

Wald: Yeah, I rode into Sentai on a white horse for *Love Stage!!*, and by a beautiful alignment of the planets, I got the green light to direct. But, as it happens, Sentai was also interested in dubbing *Hitorijime My Hero*, which had a hotter interest, the title being only a year old. So I ended up directing that show first, right as we finished up writing the script for *Love Stage!!*.

But *Love Stage!!* was the glitter bomb that sort of started everything.



Hidden Remote: *Hitorijime My Hero has some character lines which can really cut you to the core. When you're in the studio, working to match the mouth flaps, while also translating the script to another language, did it add another level to the writing and directing process trying to get those emotional messages of a young gay person to come forth in just as powerful of a way?*

Wald: I tell you, it was an entirely therapeutic endeavor. As a dubbing scriptwriter, I've got two jobs: to communicate the narrative as it is, as well as honor the emotional impact that dialogue is meant to have on the Japanese listener. Japanese is also a different culture, with a different set of parameters around everything, including romantic storytelling. The celebrated romantic hero in Japan is a gruff, quiet, mysterious, chain-smoking, overly assertive man. But over here in America, he comes off as kind of a dick.

So with *Hitorijime My Hero*, I took the dialogue in the script and crafted it so the characters didn't alienate you from them, especially in regards to triggerable territory like Kousuke and Masahiro's age difference. I worked hard to strike a more relatable chord to westerners, changing the mechanics of the lines, but not the spirit of them.



Hidden Remote: Was that one of the reasons you chose to cast David Matranga as Kousuke? To give the character a younger essence?

Wald: That was another one of our little tricks. The Japanese actor who voices Kousuke in the original iteration was using a very deep, rumbling voice. But in our version of the story, I didn't want to emphasize that age difference. So I cast David, who sounds more like a 23-year-old and only a little departed from the other characters in the show who are in high school.

Plus, of course, Matranga's got this beautiful, buttery sultry voice that just makes you melt. That's his gift. But all of this, from Masahiro trying to be "normal" around Kousuke and avoiding him, to Asaya's ultimatum love confession to Kensuke, it's an authentic experience. I mean, thank god we're not making shows about rational people who make reasonable decisions. Who would watch that?

Hidden Remote: You do play the bartender friend Natsuo in the show, but did you also, as the director, feel a connection with the four main characters?

Wald: Listen, I'm coming up on my 47th year on this planet and I can tell you at some point or another in my long, gay life, I have literally been every one of those four characters. As a director, I see it as my responsibility to illuminate those queer experiences as best as I can, with as much authenticity as I can possibly muster, and the only way to muster that authenticity is to bring it from my own life.



Hidden Remote: You talk about producing the most authentic representation of the queer experience as possible, so when you are directing these shows—*Love Stage!!*, *Hitorijime My Hero*, *Bloom Into You*—is the cast for these dubs primarily of the LGBTQ+ community as well?

Wald: I feel like representation is important on both sides. So if I can feature an out queer actor in a role that I think befits them, I absolutely will. But they also won't get casting preference. In *Hitorijime My Hero*, none of those four main actors identify as queer except for Daman Mills, the voice of Asaya. If I was going to use a gay actor in that show, I wanted it to be Asaya, because Asaya is the one who starts the show, knowing exactly who he is.

It's the same idea in *Love Stage!!*. You have the main couple, Ryoma and Izumi, for which I have a straight actor, Adam Gibbs, as Ryoma and a gay actor, Greg Ayres, as Izumi. If I was going to do a gay-straight pairing, I wanted the straight actor to be Ryoma because Ryoma very easily accepts his queerness. He spends an episode or two tossing and turning, he has a few very entertaining

nightmares, and then he's like, "You know what, I love a boy. Fine. Moving on." Then we watch Izumi twist on the vine for eight episodes.

Hidden Remote: We know that voice actors typically don't get to act together in the booth during recordings. But LGBTQ+ anime is founded so much on emotion and eye contact and characters playing off of one another. Did you get any actors to be in the booths at the same time for these shows?

Wald: As a matter of fact, yes. It was a device I used in *Hitorijime My Hero*, and I haven't gotten a chance to use it again, but I used it in that show because I felt that show was a very street-level story. There weren't a lot of cheeky moments, so I wanted the ADR to come at it from that angle. To be in proximity to an actor when stakes are high in a scene and you're saying something that makes you vulnerable, it can really galvanize a performance.

Especially in the case of Daman and Alejandro Saab, who plays Kensuke—who I call "Kenny" because everyone gets a nickname—who aren't big theatre people. So working together in the booth was a very new experience for them. Daman and Alejandro are actually good friends so there was this added level of discomfort when you have two buddies, even though they're professional actors, talking to each other about how much they love each other. There was this sense of awkwardness that really informed those scenes.



Hidden Remote: *Bloom Into You* is another one of your recent directing projects where the story is focused on two women. Was that a totally different kind of experience for you as a director with the story being about two women in love versus two men?

Wald: Yes, and it was an experience that I didn't personally understand as well. It's one of the reasons why I encouraged Sentai to have Marissa Lenti write that script, because Marissa gave that show its feminine view and feminine voice. Also, Marissa being an a-sexual person, understood the fine line in the main character Yuu who first identifies as a-sexual and then develops an emotional bond, and attraction, to her girl Touko.

Tia Ballard and Luci Christian, my two leads for that show, they are astounding performers on a microphone and the best thing you can do as a director for them is just get out of their way because they're innately brilliant.

Hidden Remote: So having directed these three Rainbow Tribe anime, and voice acted in a handful as well, I'm sure these shows all touched you on different levels. But how has the experience of directing these titles and leading this charge in the anime community impacted you?

Wald: It's really been extraordinary. I had never aspired to direct. Like nothing, ever. I was intensely ringing the bell for shows like *Love Stage!!*, telling studios how important these shows are. That there are people out there who are dying because they are alienated and this show is a cure for alienation. That these shows can save a life.

But at no point was I saying let me direct it. I was like, "Here's the sword, here's the stone, now somebody pull it!" Then I was talking to my friend Brittany Dean, then the ADR manager at Sentai, who said, "Look David, if you want this done, you're just going to have to do it yourself." And that's when I got a yes, when I said, "Out of my way, let me pull the sword! I shall be the one at the gay round table!"

Hidden Remote: Are there any LGBTQ+ anime you have your eye on to direct for the future? I've heard you have your radar up for *Wandering Son*.

Wald: Oh my radar is always all the way up. Truly, there isn't a single Yaoi or Yuri title out there I wouldn't kind of love to do, even the more "problem" queer anime like *Super Lovers*. I don't know if the U.S. is ready for that one yet, but I'd sure love to dub it. The problem is, I'm just a dude. I'm not a licensing company, so in my position I'm reliant on these studios finding these titles and giving me an opportunity to work on them for them.

We're in desperate need of new archetypes. But we're getting closer to bringing a much larger eye to this medium, and that's exciting because I know it deserves it. And I think it'll deserve it more the more we can go back and find these outstanding queer renderings and give them life in English.

NEXT: Makoto Shinkai's *Weathering With You* includes *Your Name* crossover

Hitorijime My Hero, *Love Stage!!* and *Bloom Into You* are all available to stream on [HIDIVE](#). Are there any LGBTQ+ anime you are most looking forward to being dubbed? Comment below!

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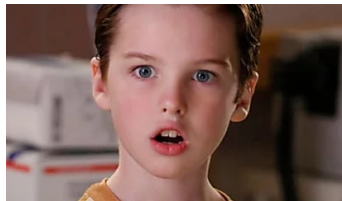
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