

Reprinted with kind permission from The Japan Times (October 14, 2021)

10 THE JAPAN TIMES TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2014

community

Foreign wives offer 'Massan' criticism and kudos

Ellie's successors question her Japanese fluency and love of hugs but welcome the issues she raises

THE FOREIGN ELEMENT

Louise George Kittaka



NHK's long-running morning drama has been viewer favorites for over 20 years. The current series, "Massan," was inspired by the lives of Masataka Taketsuru, the father of Japan's whisky industry, and his Scottish wife, Rita.

The show has been attracting attention from Japan's international community, largely due to the casting of American Charlotte Kate Fox as the first leading foreign actress in an NHK morning drama. Fox portrays the heroine, Ellie Kameyama. The show's title comes from Ellie's nickname for her husband, Masaharu, played by Tetsuji Yamayama.

One group with a vested interest in NHK's depiction of a foreign bride are the members of the Association of Foreign Wives of Japanese (AFWJ), a 500-strong organization with members of around 40 different nationalities.

In a recent online survey, 130 AFWJ members shared their thoughts on "Massan" so far. What do these women think about its foreign heroine and the implications for them as Ellie's modern-day successors?

There was much anticipation about the actress picked for the coveted role of Ellie Kameyama who, like Rita Taketsuru, is a Scotswoman. Around a third of the survey participants admitted to being initially surprised that NHK didn't tap a Scottish actress for the part, but the general consensus is that it doesn't really matter as Fox can do a fair Scottish accent and most of her dialogue is in Japanese anyway.

More than half praised the language skills of Fox, who knew no Japanese before being cast as Ellie, and a similar number agrees that Fox possesses the characteristics to make her a popular choice with Japanese audiences.

"I think they have done a good job with her character and the presentation," notes American Kathi Fuji. "She is quietly strong and supportive without giving up her own personality."

At a press conference last week in Tokyo, which she attended with senior producer Ken Sakurai, Fox spoke of the challenges of learning her lines in an unfamiliar language. "This has been the hardest thing I've ever done in my life — every day in the beginning was the hardest day I can't sugarcoat it. You have to get up every day and memorize sounds that you don't understand."

As a group, the AFWJ women had some problems with NHK's physical depiction of Ellie and her early behavior upon arrival in Japan in the early 1920s. Sixty-two percent questioned the need to make Ellie a platinum blond. (Rita Taketsuru was brunette.)

While acknowledging that the very blonde hair helps to separate the identities of the fictional Ellie and the real-life Rita, some participants said it also perpetuates the image that all foreigners

Blonde girl in the ring: Charlotte Kate Fox and Tetsuji Yamayama (second from left) play the lead couple in the NHK morning drama "Massan," which is inspired by the true story of Japanese whisky pioneer Masataka Taketsuru and his Scottish wife, Rita. KYODO



Ellie's character shaped by talks with expats, visit to Scotland and Fox's input

Ken Sakurai, the lead producer of "Massan," took the time to address some of the AFWJ members' questions about Ellie by email.

When coming up with the concept for the character of Ellie Kameyama, writer Daisuke Habara and the production team looked first to the life of Rita Taketsuru for inspiration, before fleshing out the character by adding in elements that would make Ellie an appealing and unique personality in her own right, Sakurai said.

From the outset, we thought about how the success of this NHK morning drama, which is watched by a multigenerational audience, depended on

whether the viewers could relate to our heroine Ellie's feelings."

In order to catch the essence of what makes Ellie tick, Sakurai added that Habara interviewed a number of real-life foreign wives of Japanese to hear about their experiences, as well as visiting Scotland to learn more about the culture and people.

Actress Charlotte Kate Fox, who plays Ellie, has also had input in the development of the character she plays. Sakurai recalled a memorable conversation over dinner with Habara and Fox, soon after she landed the part of Ellie.

"Charlotte said, 'Life is an adventure!' with her eyes shining. Habara

was very impressed with her belief in the future, and her comment was written into the script as one of Ellie's lines."

As for Ellie's platinum blonde hair, which AFWJ members commented on, it seems that Fox's natural color is a bit of a mystery. According to a spokeswoman from NHK, it has been dyed a number of times for previous roles, including at the time she auditioned for "Massan."

What is clear from photographs is that she was very blonde as a child. After various considerations, it was apparently decided that veering back to close to her original color would best reflect Fox's natural charm.

from Western countries are light-haired.

"Ellie was already different enough to not turn her into a 'Linotoid model,'" says Nancy Baldwin, another American.

Others noted that NHK could have paid a little more attention to the fashions, with Ellie's dresses and hairstyle being more reminiscent of "Little House on the Prairie" circa the 1880s.

The section of the survey related to Ellie's actions soon after her arrival in Japan drew the most united response. A whopping 85 percent took issue with the fact that Ellie attempted to hug all and sundry upon initial meetings. Many women commented that hugging would have been as foreign to the Scottish century ago as it was to the Japanese.

At 76 percent, almost as many members said that many of Ellie's initial antics, such as trying to walk into the house wearing shoes or clumsily knocking things over, only serve to reinforce stereotypes of "typical foreigner" behavior.

"I think she would be naive about this country upon arrival but the way that that inexperience is portrayed and expressed is rather childish, and not that of a woman who had made the decision to leave her family to live in a very different and distant country," says Laura Kawaguchi from Canada.

At the same time, members acknowledged that some of Ellie's behavior mir-

rors that of the standard morning drama heroine, who typically starts out as a sweet-natured but gauche ingenue before growing in confidence and competence throughout the series.

"I think it's important to view the character of Ellie within its context — that of the NHK morning drama. She's been written as sympathetic, though the choices the writers made might not always be comfortable for us," notes Rachel Greenwood Yokomatsu, a New Zealander.

Many of the issues faced by Ellie in "Massan" are familiar to AFWJ members. Not surprisingly for the times, Ellie and Masaharu experience strong opposition from both families, with veteran actress Pinko Izumi playing Ellie's formidable mother-in-law.

However, while close to a third of AFWJ survey participants faced initial disapproval from their husbands' families, the most common problems as newcomers were "feelings of isolation in the community" (64 percent) and "struggles with finding my place in Japanese society" (63 percent). These were closely followed by "problems with realizing expectations of marriage with Japanese norms" at 57 percent.

When asked about the same issues

nov, the responses reveal that things get easier over time, but the same three issues still loom largest in the lives of AFWJ members, at 45 percent for both "feelings of isolation" and "finding my place," and 42 percent for "realigning expectations of marriage."

Fox touched on this last issue during the recent press conference, expressing an interest in Western feminism within the context of an intercultural marriage.

"When a foreign wife comes to Japan, does she have to bend her way of thinking, and how do she and her husband work things out?" Fox said. "I wonder how they align their ideas."

Marian Hara, who hails from Scotland, comments on a similar topic, citing the "inability of many people to appreciate that it's fair for my husband to make adjustments and meet me halfway, as I've made a lot of adjustments that get taken for granted."

One of AFWJ's more senior members, who was married in 1970 and chose to remain anonymous, notes that time can take care of things. "Most of the naysayers are now dead!" she quips.

Irrespective of their perceived shortcomings of the series, 80 percent of participants say that NHK deserves credit for the decision to make a morning drama centering on an intercultural marriage, while some 71 percent believe it is a posi-

tive thing if "Massan" can help the average Japanese viewer to become more aware of the related issues.

"My husband and I watch together and we've both seen conversations echoing ones we've had," notes Alsha Smyth Yamamori. "It makes us think, and talk more about our differences."

Fellow American Leza Lovitz, who is the only foreign wife in her neighborhood, says, "Whatever the stereotypes and drawbacks of the show, it has gone a long way in opening hearts and minds, so I am grateful."

Christine Pearson Ishi, also from the U.S., expands on this theme: "The show isn't just about a foreign wife and her struggle of learning to live in a different country, as much as about how a Japanese family and society have to learn to deal with someone who is not from Japan."

In the final part of the survey, participants had the chance to comment on what they would like to tell NHK about "Massan." The most popular topic was the speed with which Ellie has picked up Japanese.

Some women suggested that Ellie should have used more English at first, at least in private with her husband. German Annette Karazon points out that NHK could have made more use of subtitles while Ellie's Japanese proficiency gradually improved.

"My daily conversational Japanese is fine and yet a number of people have recently inquired why I don't speak better having lived here for more than 10 years," says American Beth Oba. "I fail miserably compared to how fast Ellie is learning, and I think the precedent being set is not fair to me or any foreigner in Japan."

Scott Fiona Matsushima expressed the wish that Ellie be portrayed as a Scottish woman rather than a generic Westerner.

"For example, they said that 'Auld Lang Syne' is an English song but actually it is a Scottish song written in the Scots language. It would be great to feature more about Scottish culture."

As the show moves forward, taking the Kameyamas into the war and beyond, many AFWJ members are looking forward to seeing how Ellie's role develops.

"I hope her character will mature realistically and will make people curious in a positive way about international marriages," says Stephanie Napier, another American.

"While 'Massan' is a drama and therefore a work of fiction, many of the themes, such as acceptance and striving to understand the culture of the person you love, hold true even in today's society," says AFWJ PR officer Heather Fukase, an Australian based in Nagano.

Fox echoed similar sentiments when asked to comment on what viewers can learn from Ellie and her approach.

"Her biggest message is 'Never give up.' Today, so many people walk away and give up when things go wrong, but for Ellie that simply isn't an option," said Fox. "If we give the message to be patient and don't walk away, we have done our job."

Louise George Kittaka is a member of the Association of Foreign Wives of Japanese, which is open to any foreign woman married, engaged or in a long-term relationship with a Japanese partner (www.afwj.org). Your comments and story ideas: community@japantimes.co.jp