

Critique of "Love, Cake, and Starship Officers"

"Love, Cake, and Starship Officers" is a 31 page comic by Emily and Charlotte Myers-Stanhope. Rather than drawing the pages, Emily used photographs, run through some Photoshop filter, to construct the panels, giving this comic a unique look. The story is amusing and decently easy to follow with interesting art that has some slight inconsistencies but still does a good job of illustrating the story.

The story portrayed in the comic has a distinctly shoujo feel to it. The main character, Tiphona, is a Pullip doll with a huge head and eyes who wears a Lolita dress and, like most shoujo heroines, is not too smart. The story focuses on Tiphona's efforts to win the affection of a Spock Ken doll. Although I generally dislike stupid Shoujo main characters, Tiphona's stupidity is usually played for laughs and it contrasts nicely with Spock's brilliance. (The Kirk and Spock dolls both act similarly to the Star Trek characters they are modeled after.) Tiphona comes off as very oblivious and often unaware of her surroundings, which is often amusing as she reacts to situations she does not understand. The story focuses on interactions between the characters, and there is not much action except for the two montage pages that show Tiphona working on her sewing project.

Throughout the story, Tiphona consults her friends, two smaller fashion dolls, who give her advice on how to get Spock's attention. One of these dolls is sweet with pink hair and a pastel dress, while the other is ruder and wears red and black. These dolls make

up an angel/devil duo with one watching out for Tiphona and trying to help her and the other mocking her and “helping” in such ways as supplying her with shotglasses with silhouettes of naked women on them for her tea party. It is revealed fairly late in the story that Tiphona is the only one who can actually see these smaller dolls, and the reason for this is never explained. I would think that they were meant to represent two opposing sides of her subconscious, except that they do not seem to be as dumb as she is.

The art used in this comic is interesting, because it is all based on photographs, usually run through the same filter, but in a couple instances, such as the page displaying the finished felt cake, other filters are used. The filter used for most of the pictures seems to be a good fit for this comic, because it adds black outlining to the pictures, making them seem more like they belong in a comic book. The shading does generally do a good job of showing off the detail in the doll’s clothing, hair, and faces, but sometimes the colors seem a little darker than the bright cheerful colors I would expect from something in the shoujo genre. (The dress up game screenshots on page 12 is a good example of shoujo coloring.) The cover seems very fitting for the genre, but the cover design seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the book. There is also some inconsistency in the colors and shading among the panels. Even within a single page, some of the panels may be darker than others with black spots all over. In the tea party scene at the end, the grass drastically changes color from panel to panel, although these changes add some variation to what would otherwise be a very dull scene to look through, as the characters just sit around and talk for ten pages, so the change in color as well as in texture (as the panels move closer or farther

from the grass) are welcome additions.

The use of dolls as characters is an interesting choice, particularly because unlike real people or drawn characters they cannot change their facial expressions. As a Pullip, Tiphophona has eyes that can be moved from side to side and closable eyelids, but the rest of her expression and the entire faces of the other dolls in the story are painted on. This adds the extra challenge of having to show the characters feelings entirely through words, and leads to the unavoidable situation of having characters look like they are feeling a completely different emotion than that they are supposed to be according to the story. It also means that if two characters are talking back and forth, the panels showing this conversation can become very repetitive, as neither character can change their expression. For example, in the tea party scene that makes up a third of this story, four characters sit on the grass and talk. Emily avoids having every page look the same by using a different panel layout on every page and varying the camera angles used to shoot the dolls. The dolls heads also seem to turn depending on whom they are talking to, and Tiphona's eyes and arms sometimes change positions. These small changes make the tea party scene readable and avoid making the pictures seem redundant and unnecessary for this part.

As a shoujo story, this comic relies heavily on words and dialogue to get the story across. The word bubbles in this comic are generally easy to follow, although sometimes (particularly during the tea party scene) the amount of space taken up by these bubbles can seem excessive and may make the conversation hard to follow. None of the speech bubbles have indicators to show who is talking, so in panels with more than one character,

the reader must infer who the speaker is based on proximity to the speech bubble and/or speaking style. These cues tend to be clear enough that it is generally not hard to follow who is speaking, however.

Overall, this comic is an amusing shoujo story that uses a unique art style. The art is somewhat inconsistent at times, but overall does a good job of illustrating the story without becoming too repetitive, even after 50 pictures of the same doll.

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