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From AM New York

It's not Halloween--it's cosplay

By Maureen Ker | Special to amNewYork
4:13 PM EDT, August 4, 2008



Michelle Folvar playing Namine from Kingdom Hearts. (Photo by Maureen Ker / August 4, 2008)

The scene seemed straight out of a Japanese comic book: a young maiden swathed in a kimono stood demurely under a row of blossoming cherry trees, her long hair flecked with pink petals. Next to her, a samurai warrior wielded a wooden sword.

But this was no manga page: The setting was Brooklyn.

"I'm playing Naminé from Kingdom Hearts!" declared college student Michelle Folvar, 19, as she strolled the Brooklyn Botanic Garden recently.

Folvar is not a performer or movie extra she's a dedicated "cosplayer."

Originating in Japan, cosplay or costume play is a popular among a subculture of fans who dress up as characters from comic books, animated movies and video games. The movement, once confined to anime conventions, is gaining popularity among teens on the streets of New York.

Fans visit websites like www.cosplay.com and www.animenext.org/forum to find fellow cosplayers and plan mass meet ups favoring Japanese-related events like the cherry blossom festival earlier this year.

"This is different from Halloween," said Megan Jardine, 17, of Staten Island, a self-proclaimed nerd who wore a long yellow dress and sported a scarlet bow atop her red wig.

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"I'm doing this for fun, unlike Halloween where you do it for candy," said Jardine, who spent a week sewing her costume.



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"To me, the best part of cosplaying is how strangers will come up to talk to you and ask to photograph you," Jardine said. "When you are wearing regular clothes, no one would ever do that."

Even among the outlandishly dressed cosplayers, Markisha Montgomery, 15, stood out. Montgomery wore yellow cat eye-like contact lenses and carried a toy dagger. Hunched over with her plastic weapon held high, Montgomery looked like a ninja ready to pounce. "I'm playing Kiba from Naruto," said Montgomery, of Brooklyn.

"Everything she does revolves around this Kiba character," said Samantha Montgomery, Markisha's mother. "But I don't mind that she is obsessed because she is teaching herself Japanese. She wants to become a cartoonist someday."

Susan Bachman, a retired schoolteacher from Cape Cod, Mass., was among the Botanic Garden visitors who had stopped to gawk at the cosplayers.

"I'm not familiar with the characters but it sure looks fun," said Bachman, who on a biking trip around New York. "Besides, they could be doing worse things at their age."

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