

otaku: (oh-TAH-koo) *n.* Term used to refer to fanatical devotees of anime or manga. Japanese speakers might use this term in a pejorative sense to denote someone lacking in social graces and breadth who is obsessive about a certain subject.

—*The Complete Anime Guide*

The Conscience Of The OTAKING

The Studio Gainax Saga in Four Parts



As Mel Brooks once said, "It's good to be the King." In our exclusive four-part interview, ANIMERICA talks with the best-known otaku in Japan, the original "Otaking," Toshio Okada. Join us for the royal saga of the rise and fall and rise again of super-studio Gainax and more industry buzz than Robert Altman's *THE PLAYER*. Interview by Carl Gustav Horn

A stalwart young man in a suit standing in a great corporate skyscraper and declaring that he will make the future; a pudgy, plaid-shirted fanboy with the meltdown eyes of madness squatting in a six-mat room, holding up an 8mm camera as if it were the ultimate weapon. Both are scenes from *OTAKU NO VIDEO*, the searing self-parody created by the legendary anime studio of fans-turned-pro, Gainax. And both are scenes from the life of Gainax's principal founder and president until 1992, Toshio Okada, the otaku among otaku, the Otaking.

"I have been so called in Japan," said Okada, during his recent visit to State College, Pennsylvania's Otakon 1995, where this interview occurred, "half out of respect and half out of ridicule. In Japan, the word 'otaku' is always greeted with negative images, but this common sense does not hold true for the United States. I realized that the genuine pride of Americans who are otaku is nothing but pure and serious." If that is so, it must be in large part due to the true legends Okada himself has written for the American fans: a man who started out selling fanzines in an oversized Char Aznable outfit is now a leading cultural pundit published in the weekly magazine of Japan's largest newspaper; a man who entered college only to join a science-fiction club—dropping out as soon as he did—who now lectures at Japan's most prestigious university.

But Okada's defining moment came when, at the age of twenty-seven, with only a string of clever 8mm anime shorts and live-action SF parodies to his credit as a producer, he talked Japan's multi-billion dollar toy conglomerate Bandai into giving his nascent studio, Gainax, the largest budget ever for a full-length, 35mm anime film: eight hundred million yen for *THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE*. In the megacorporate halls of Bandai, there were those such as *WINGS'* co-producer Shigeru Watanabe, who fairly glowed with the infectious idealism of a film whose underlying theme was to be the lift-off of a band of youth who would show the whole world their talent, blazing over the limb of the Earth like a new dawning. That talent was indeed shown in the film, *THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE*, which swept the Japanese critics' awards and which found a particular acclaim among the anime fans of the United States, but it took until September of 1994, seven years and six months after its initial release, before Bandai finally made its money back.

Gainax would go on to modest success with the OAV series *AIM FOR THE TOP! GUN-BUSTER* and overwhelming mass appeal with the

TV show *NADIA*, but there is no denying that the stunning commercial failure of their greatest achievement always shadowed it—the studio today refers to *HONNEAMISE* dryly as their "little-known masterpiece."

When I interviewed Toshio Okada at Otakon 1995, it was as (modestly) the greatest fan of the film in the English-speaking world getting to meet at last with the man who, together with *WINGS'* writer/director Hiroyuki Yamaga, was the most responsible for the film's very existence. I expected to have some of my otaku-esque questions about its production answered. I did not expect to find Okada taking personal responsibility for *HONNEAMISE*'s box-office catastrophe, offering revisionist theories on its inherent weaknesses. Charismatic and gregarious, Okada spoke freely and candidly, indifferent to shocking the preconceptions of his American standard-bearer, who, like Eliot's Magi, was beginning to wonder as the evening wore on whether he had come to this little town to experience a birth or a death.

At one moment contrite, and the next fiercely proud of *HONNEAMISE*, Okada's statements about the film's dubious advertising campaign and marketing plan suggest that it entered the theaters with one hand tied behind its back by others. These recollections and much more are included in this landmark interview, which amount to the largest document on Gainax ever published in the English language. In its four parts, Toshio Okada discusses the very earliest days of Gainax, its seizure of the moment, its life of chaos, its four-year hiatus from anime, and the place it is today—without Okada. Many of his remarks are bound to be controversial, demanding feedback from its other founding members who are still there, such as

Yamaga and Hideaki Anno, writer/director of Gainax's first post-Okada anime, the acclaimed new TV series *NEON GENESIS EVANGELION*. Hopefully, such responses can come to these pages in the future. But for the present, here is Toshio Okada's own amazing story of fans who became giants; a story of ends as bitter as old blackness, and beginnings as fresh as the morning sun.

Carl Gustav Horn

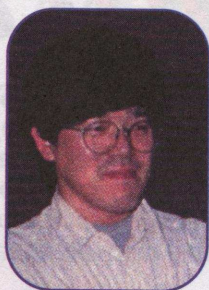
Special thanks to fellow *WINGS'* standard-bearer Neil Nadelman; to Gainax for their information on Daicon Film; and to the staff of Otakon 1995.

Two faces of Okada. Kubo (right) and Tanaka (below) from *OTAKU NO VIDEO*





Hideaki Anno
ANIMATION DIRECTOR
THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE • DIRECTOR
GUNBUSTER, NADIA, NEON GENESIS EVANGELION



Takami Akai
CHARACTER DESIGNER **DAICON III AND IV OPENING ANIME** • ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE • DESIGNER
PRINCESS MAKER



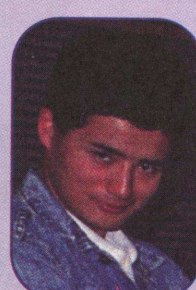
Mahiro Maeda
CONTINUITY AND MECHANICAL DESIGN
NADIA • PRODUCTION DESIGN AND LAYOUT
THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE



Kazumi Okada
Toshio Okada's wife, nee Kazumi Amano, and the inspiration for the character of the same name in **GUNBUSTER**. Mrs. Okada herself still works at Gainax in their merchandising department.



Shinji Higuchi
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR **NADIA, THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE** STORYBOARDS **OTAKU NO VIDEO** • Having left Gainax shortly after Okada's departure, Shinji is currently back at Gainax, doing storyboards on **NEON GENESIS EVANGELION**.



Hiroyuki Yamaga
WRITER AND DIRECTOR
THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE • PRODUCER **NEON GENESIS EVANGELION**

AIM FOR THE TOP! GUNBUSTER

PART ONE

In Part One, Toshio Okada discusses the uncertainty over Gainax's direction and the sense of closure that led to him leaving Gainax, as well as his opinions on the different kind of company Gainax is without him.

ANIMERICA: Why did you leave Gainax?

Okada: There are several reasons. Number one was that I had accomplished what I set out to do in animation and computer games. In the beginning, when I made the Daicon III and IV Opening Animation shorts, my dream was to someday make an anime movie, a robot anime and an anime TV series. They're all completed—**HONNEAMISE NO TSUBASA—ORITSU UCHUGUN (THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE—ROYAL SPACE FORCE), TOP O NERAE! (AIM FOR THE TOP! GUNBUSTER)**—which even now, I think was the best robot anime ever made, and **FUSHIGI NO UMI NO NADIA** ("Nadia of the Mysterious Seas," released in English as simply **NADIA** or **THE SECRET OF BLUE WATER**). So there's nothing more for me to do in anime. When **NADIA** was finished, I thought to myself, maybe that's it. But there was one more thing—producing an anime just about me. I sort of wrote the basic script, and then my staff worked on it in secret. Then one day, I hear, "Okay, we've got the rushes! Time for the preview!"

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24





CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7



MIRROR, MIRROR

OTAKU NO VIDEO is the title of two semi-autobiographical videos, both released in 1991—the titles, **OTAKU NO VIDEO '82** and **OTAKU NO VIDEO '85** refer to the events in the story. Both are available on a single English-subtitled tape from AnimEigo. Above, Misty-May, the General Products mascot—General Products being the Gainax company **OTAKU NO VIDEO** parodies.



THE GIRL, THE RUBBER SUIT, AND EVERYTHING

Originally formed in 1982 for the purpose of making SFX films, the 1981 **Daicon III Opening Anime** is sometimes considered their first production. Daicon film achieved the most fame for their 1983 **Daicon IV Opening Anime**, featuring the famous “bunny-girl,” (above) which won an ANIMAGE Grand Prix award. After their 1985 85-minute, 16mm SFX epic **THE REVENGE OF YAMATO OROCHI** (below), Daicon Film was superseded by the newly formed Studio Gainax.



What preview? **“OTAKU NO VIDEO '82!”** Huh?!? I was very surprised.

ANIMERICA: And that preview was on your birthday?

Okada: Yes, July 1st. So then I also made a second version, **OTAKU NO VIDEO '85**. It sold thru Toshiba EMI—hey...no one can sell my personal, private birthday video to all Japan and the United States! [LAUGHS] I was very happy with it.

ANIMERICA: What happened after that?

Okada: Well, then, when the Gainax staff asked me what we should make next, I said we shouldn't make any more anime for two years. Hiroyuki Yamaga thought that maybe we should do something else. But Hideaki Anno disagreed. As he put it, we already had the staff, so he felt we should keep going with anime projects. So I then decided we *should* continue. But I didn't really have any feelings from deep inside, and I didn't really think we should continue in this kind of work if we didn't have anything *inside* of us to support it.

ANIMERICA: Why did you think you had to wait two years before you could work on another anime project? Is that because you thought you'd need two years for a really good idea?

Okada: No, I meant we needed time to think about *why* we should make more anime, or perhaps we should move on to another genre. Gainax, after all, started out as Daicon Film, which was not an animation circle or club. Daicon Film was about live-action SF and *tokusatsu* special effects. We made two films, ah....

ANIMERICA: **KAIKETSU NÔTENKI?**

Okada: [LAUGHS] No, **KAIKETSU NÔTENKI** was my own private film, and I directed it on my own. The two films I meant were **AIKOKU SENTAI DAI NIPPON** (“Patriotic Task Force Great Japan”), and **KAETTE-KITA ULTRAMAN** (“The Return of Ultraman”). Making **KAETTE-KITA ULTRAMAN** was a very exciting experience for us, and during the production of **HONNEAMISE**, Yamaga planned that someday, we'd make a feature-length live-action film. So, my plan was always to make three anime productions and then move on to live-action. Because...well, for example, I don't like the second series of **UCHÛ SENKAN YAMATO** (“Space Cruiser Yamato”). I thought **YAMATO's** first TV series and the movie **SARABA UCHÛ SENKAN YAMATO: AI NO SENSHITACHI** (“Farewell, Space Cruiser Yamato: Soldiers of Love”) were very good, but after that, the second series just wasn't necessary. And I think other anime fans would agree with me. Maybe somebody likes sequels, but it's no way of life for me. Challenge—new challenges, and change—are my favorite things. So that's why, after **GUNBUSTER**, I began to make computer games, such as **Princess Maker**. It was an entirely new and strange, yet pretty concept for a computer game—a simulation of your own daughter growing up.

ANIMERICA: Do you receive royalties for **Princess Maker**?

© 1991 Kenichi Sonoda • Gainax • Youmex

Okada: No.

ANIMERICA: But you said it was your idea.

Okada: Yeah, but...I think it's stupid, that someone thinks, "Oh, it's my idea, so I must have the copyright." Everyone at Gainax knows that it's my concept, my game. It's difficult to explain, but that's the way I feel. Akai was the one who directed it, and he's worked very hard on it. The *idea* just flashed, in two seconds...but it's only an idea. The planning and the directing—that's very hard work. So I felt Akai should have the copyright. I was president of Gainax then, and I had the idea, but that's *ordinary*. I talked to Akai about it, and he said, "Oh! It'll be a game!" So then Akai made it, he holds the copyright for it, and he's made a lot of money off it. And that's *okay* with me.

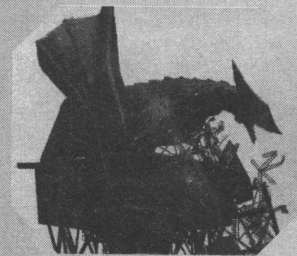
ANIMERICA: I understand.

Okada: And so, I guess I've otakuized the computer game genre as well as anime, with such games as *Dennô Gakuen* ("Cybernetic High School") and *Battle Skin Panic*, and software versions of *SILENT MÖBIUS* and *NADIA*. But that was enough for me, and then I had nothing more to do with computer games either. [LAUGHS] By that time, it had been two years since I had been able to decide on anything to do with anime. At that point, Takami Akai told me I should change my job. Because we're friends—not "presidents," not "producers"—Yamaga is not a "director." In the beginning of Gainax, we were all just friends. So, just like a role-playing game, the idea was that we'd switch jobs. Akai told me, "I'll be the producer, you can be the creator, and Anno can be the director." About then, Anno and I started talking about the base story of *NEON GENESIS EVANGELION*. But Yamaga had another plan. He wanted to make *AOKI URU (BLUE URU)*, part two of *HONNEAMISE*. I couldn't understand why it should be made at all. So I said to Yamaga, Okay, this is *your* plan...I can have nothing to do with it. So he was going to produce it on his own, and Anno was going to direct. But then the plan crashed, due to problems with money and staff. Finally, after all this, I was talking with my wife, and I asked her what she thought of the whole thing and how she felt. And she said, "I think you're a stupid man, because you're still president of Gainax, yet you've made nothing for two years. It's not your way." I was very surprised to hear that. [LAUGHS] And so I decided to leave Gainax.

ANIMERICA: Was this in 1993?

Okada: 1993...1992, I think. And then later, back in Osaka, I gave my friend Takeshi Sawamura a call, because I'd heard that he was now president of Gainax. And then I heard that my friend Yamaga is president of Gainax, Huh? Yamaga? He's a *director!* [LAUGHS] I start thinking to myself, he's not that good at ordering around a staff, or a company. So I asked my friend Yasuhiro Takeda to call me up and explain, and he says, "Uh, I'm not on the main staff of Gainax now." Huh? What's happened in my—what *used* to be my company? And then the main staff explained it to me: "Okay, it's just that now there are two presidents of Gainax, Mr. Sawamura and Mr. Yamaga. To the press, Yamaga will say, 'I am president of Gainax,' and to the bankers and financiers, Sawamura will say, 'I am president of Gainax.'" Two

The triangle-beaked Gaos from the recent GAMERA film.

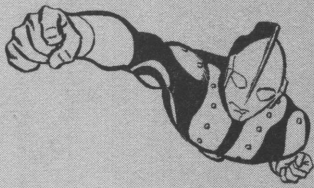


Tokusatsu (short for *tokushû satsuei*, meaning special-effects photography) is the Japanese term for SFX films. **Tokusatsu** refers to live-action shows, not specifically the battle-team or *sentai* shows such as **MIGHTY MORPHIN POWER RANGERS** (although the battle-team shows do fall into this category), but single-hero shows such as **ULTRAMAN** or **KAMEN RIDER** or films such as Keita Amemiya's **ZEIRAM**, which utilize science fiction special effects.



KAIKETSU NÔTENKI (above) finished in August of 1982, was a 8mm, 10-minute satire of a 1979 TV show beloved of otaku, Tsuburaya's **KAIKETSU ZUBATTO**, which aired on Tokyo's Channel 12, now the same TV Tokyo channel that airs **NEON GENESIS EVANGELION**. **Kaiketsu** ("Masterman") is used much the same way we would call a superhero "Captain." **Zubatto** is the sound effect of something slicing through the air, like a sword or whip. **Nôtenki**, however, is Osaka slang for "happy-go-lucky." In an additional irony, **KAIKETSU ZUBATTO**'s sponsor was also in Daicon Film's future, the ubiquitous Bandai. In the show, wandering P.I. Ken Hayakawa, clad in a black leather (white in summer) cowboy suit, traveled the land with his guitar righting wrongs and searching for the killer of his friend Asuka, the "poor mountain-man scientist" who developed Ken's *zubatto*-powered suit for use in space travel. The lead in **KAIKETSU NÔTENKI** was played by Yasuhiro Takeda, co-chair of Daicon III with Okada, and now an executive at Gainax who has never quite managed to live down this role—but since Takeda and Okada are often mistaken for each other, Okada says, he seemed perfect. Daicon Film even made a sequel in February of 1984, **KAIKETSU NÔTENKI 2**. An ultra-obscure in-joke in **OTAKU NO VIDEO**, caught not even by AnimEigo's extensive liner notes, is the *nô* symbol on Fukuhara's apron, the emblem of **KAIKETSU NÔTENKI**. Despite **NÔTENKI**'s Tsuburaya origins (see **KAETTE-KITA ULTRAMAN**), both it, its sequel, and **AIKOKU SENTAI DAI-NIPPON** were released on VHS by Daicon Film and sold through General Products in the 1980s.

AIKOKU SENTAI DAI-NIPPON ("Patriot Task Force Great Japan"), completed in August 1982, is a 8mm, 20-minute satire of Toei's long-running and various "super sentai" series, such as **KYORYŪ SENTAI JÜRANGER**, footage from which is used in **MIGHTY MORPHIN POWER RANGERS**. **AIKOKU** featured the typical four-man, one-woman team, with the code names "Ai Tempura," "Ai Sukiyaki," "Ai Harakiri," "Ai Kamikaze," and "Ai Geisha." With their giant robot, they fight the sinister menace of "Red Bear," which seeks to indoctrinate Japanese youth with the tenets of "Community Science" through crimson-colored books. Reportedly, a Russian attendee at Daicon IV reacted to **AIKOKU** with the typical good humor of the Brezhnev era, despite Okada's insistence that the film had nothing to do with the Soviet Union.



ANNO STRIKES A POSE

According to Okada, the animator had made home **ULTRAMAN** movies even as a kid. But despite the more tolerant approach to fan use of copyrighted characters in Japan, as evidenced by its thriving *dōjinshi* culture, it seems films—specifically series owned by Tsuburaya Productions, creators of **ULTRAMAN**—may be another matter. (Daicon Film's 8mm 10-minute short, **KAETTA-KITA ULTRAMAN**, was subsequently never released to the public.) In fact, not even the title of Gainax's Tsuburaya homage appears in the articles on Daicon Film published in the two main books on **HONNEAMISE**, although the **B-CLUB COMPLETED FILE** refers cryptically to Daicon's very first production as being in the style of a "tokusatsu TV movie" about a "hard SF hero." (This intelligence is accompanied by a not-so-cryptic shot of the cast in their Monster Attack Team uniforms.) The film is, however, mentioned by title in the storyboard book, **AILE DE HONNEAMISE: ANIMATE COLLECTION 07**, on page 23.

A RIGHTEOUS ROLE MODEL

Ultraman 80 vs. Space Ninja Baltan.



presidents—and they don't talk to each other about what they're doing, and I don't know, either. [LAUGHS]

ANIMERICA: Why, for the purposes of the media's view of Gainax, would Yamaga be president?

Okada: I don't know, because it's very hard for me to ask Yamaga. If I asked him, he couldn't really explain anything to me. [LAUGHS] So I can only wonder about it, but many people have said that Gainax has changed these last three or four years. Three months after I left, many other people left as well: Mahiro Maeda, Mr. Kanda, Mr. Murahama, and Shinji Higuchi—right now Shinji's the SFX director of the new **GAMERA** film; he's a very talented man. In those days, many talented and powerful people left Gainax. It used to be that we worked together, we talked together, we never got enough sleep—it was very hard, but we were like a family. That was Gainax. It was no ordinary company, and no bankers would finance such a company. But things have changed. **Princess Maker 1** and **2** made a lot of money for Gainax, and it's almost an ordinary company now.

ANIMERICA: They've got their finances under control?

Okada: Yes, and they've got control of their work. They'll say, "This month we've got to do the DOS/V version of that game, next month, that screen saver, this month's for **Princess Maker 3**, and that month for **EVANGELION** episode 5." [LAUGHS] They're very controlled, and I think it's a good thing for the Gainax staff, because now their creative plans can be under control too. In my day, one year we would make so much money, and—ha, ha, ha—next year, very poor. One month we'd be making films [BERZERKER SCREAM] every, every, every, day! But next month we wouldn't have any work [CRY OF DESPAIR]. That's the way it was. But now, things are under control. And I really think it's very good for their staff. But...it's not my way. ★

Next: In Part Two of the ANIMERICA interview, Toshio Okada discusses the origins of Gainax as an anime studio, the genesis of **THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE**, and how Gainax's "chaos strategy" worked for **GUNBUSTER**, but not **NADIA**.