

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



Tanaka from **OTAKU NO VIDEO** (aka Toshio Okada)

PART
3

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 **Toshio Okada**, the otaku of otaku...the Otaking! 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**

You may know him through his anime alter ego, "Tanaka," in **OTAKU NO VIDEO**. But the real-life man is hardly less of a character—going to college only so he could join a science fiction club, he formed a small group of fan amateurs into **Daicon Film**, which amazed fans on both sides of the Pacific with their "garage video" anime productions and super battle-team live-action shorts. On Christmas Eve, 1984, the former Daicon Film group went pro as **Studio Gainax**, the zealot heretics who made **ROYAL SPACE FORCE: THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE** (1987), **AIM FOR THE TOP! GUNBUSTER**

(1988), **NADIA: THE SECRET OF BLUE WATER** (1989), and **OTAKU NO VIDEO** (1991). Conversant with English, Okada was one of the key planners of AnimeCon '91, one of the first major U.S. conventions to be devoted entirely to anime. But in 1992 he resigned the presidency of Gainax and made his way to Tokyo University, where the former dropout now lectures on multimedia. Returning to the U.S. for Otakon in 1995, Toshio Okada gave his first-ever interview to the English-language anime press. This four-part account gives a rare and controversial inside angle on Gainax, the most iconoclastic of all anime studios.

THE ROYAL SPACE FORCE'S
TRIUMPHAL PARADE ON SHIRO'S RETURN
FROM SPACE



**Yuji Moriyama**

Best known as the writer and director of the parody anime *PROJECT A-KO* that was much more popular than a drama such as *WINGS* at the time they were both released; the irony is that Moriyama was also one of *WINGS*' animation directors.

**Haruka Takachiho**

Sometimes called the "Godfather" of Japanese SF fans, Takachiho is the creator of the anime movie and OAV series *CRUSHER JOE* as well as *DIRTY PAIR* and *DIRTY PAIR FLASH*. A longtime friend of Gainax, he is known for his remark that the unknown intellectual strength of Japanese SF—beyond giant monsters, robots, or space opera—could be found in *WINGS*.

**Shiro Lhadatt**

The 21-year-old protagonist of *WINGS* (shown here as a wide-eyed 15-year-old), who begins as an introverted slacker who consciously avoids the world, and ends up making history. A large part of *WINGS* concerns itself with Shiro's observations and actions as he slowly develops moral awareness; but he rarely states his feelings explicitly. Shiro's worldview was based on that held at the time by *WINGS*' director, Hiroyuki Yamaga, who was only a few years older than his character. Shiro's appearance was reportedly based on actor Treat Williams (*HAIR*, *PRINCE OF THE CITY*, *THINGS TO DO IN DENVER WHEN YOU'RE DEAD*).

**Leiquinni Nondelaiko**

The 17-year-old anti-heroine of *WINGS* is one of the most unusual female characters in anime; a woman with perfect esteem for God but none for herself. Leiquinni's dream that space flight will usher in an age of peace for mankind is what revives Shiro's own dreams of ascent, and there is a mysterious link between the two even at the end; yet their entire "relationship" is based on a lack of real communication, and when the illusion shatters, it does so violently.

**Hayao Miyazaki**

President of Studio Ghibli and Japan's most respected anime director; also Japan's top-grossing director since his 1993 film *PORCO ROSSO*. Miyazaki's career in the industry dates back to the 1960s, but his breakthrough film was 1984's *NAUSICAA OF THE VALLEY OF WIND*.

SHIRO AND LEQUINNI LOOK
TOWARD THE SKY, AND THE
FUTURE

INTERVIEW WITH TOSHIO OKADA, PART THREE

In Part Three, Okada gives his own criticism of his greatest production and greatest failure, *THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE*, discussing the Japanese response to the film, the self-symbolic nature of the narrative, and contrasting Hayao Miyazaki's creative control with Gainax's chaos.

ANIMERICA: When you look back at it, how do you see *WINGS* now, after all these years?

Okada: Uhh...the screenplay is not very strong.

ANIMERICA: Could you explain?

Okada: Our goal at first was to make a very "realistic" film. So we couldn't have the kind of strong, dramatic construction you'd find in a Hollywood movie. *WINGS* is an art film. And at the time, I thought, that was very good, that this is something—an anime art film. But now when I look back, I realize...this was a major motion picture. Bandai spent a lot of money on it. It was our big chance. Maybe if I'd given it a little stronger structure, and a little simpler story—change it a little, make it not so different—it could have met the mainstream. Then ordinary people would have said, "Oh, it's a fantastic movie, a good movie." But it ended up an "art" film.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10



HOW MUCH IS THAT ROBOT IN THE WINDOW?

Bandai is Japan's largest toy company (their "toy" division logo is shown above); according to THE NEW YORK TIMES, they bankroll half of the anime shows currently on television, including such top-rated hits as *SAILOR MOON* and *DRAGON BALL*. Bandai financed and owns Gainax's first two productions, *THE WINGS OF HON-NEAMISE* and *AIM FOR THE TOP! GUN-BUSTER*, while Gainax's current TV show *NEON GENESIS EVANGELION* has no association with Bandai, highly unusual for a mecha show. The perception of Gainax as Japan's hottest "unsigned" anime talent and Bandai's desire to produce its first film were among the unique circumstances that led to *WINGS* being made in 1987. Their president then and now is Makoto Yamashina, who said of *WINGS*, "I don't understand it in the least. Therefore it has to be terrific."



THE MORNING AFTER

Shiro and Lequinni confront the morning after after his attempted rape. Lequinni's apologetic manner in the English version of *WINGS*, in which she newly takes the blame for Shiro's attack on her, was blasted as sexist by many U.S. critics who screened the film.

ANIMERICA: Did you think that it would be successful, a hit?

Okada: No. Because in order for me to have said it was successful, a *hit*, *WINGS* would have had to have made four billion yen.

ANIMERICA: Five times its budget? Is that what Bandai said?

Okada: Not *only* Bandai. Bandai's opinion of how much money we had to make varied. But all of the marketing data said that we had to get back five times our costs within the Japanese theaters. But we didn't get back the money. No, I mustn't say *we*. *Bandai* didn't get back the money. And of course, it was my responsibility. I was the producer of that film.

ANIMERICA: In the storyboard book of *WINGS*, Yamaga talks about *STAR QUEST*, the first English version of *WINGS*, that premiered in Los Angeles in 1987. He talks about the phone calls he got from the dubbing studio in Los Angeles, asking, "Can we change this?...Can we cut this?" He says he was very confused, because he didn't know they were going to be changing things around. When you went to Los Angeles to see *STAR QUEST*, did you know that something was wrong?

Okada: Yeah. Because this was our first film, neither Yamaga nor myself had any right of final cut. Bandai had right of final cut, of dubbing, of distribution throughout Japan and the whole world—so they could change it by themselves. And as for what happened, I'm not surprised. In Bandai, there are some people who know about making movies, but most there don't. And there are some people who want to have political power within that company. So someone says, "Oh, this movie, it's mine, it's mine, it's mine." And someone will say, "It's going to be mine for the United States." And someone will say, "It's going to mine for the United Kingdom." And so, such people changed *WINGS* without talking to us.

ANIMERICA: You know, for the past three years, American fans have voted *WINGS* the best anime film ever made on the rec.arts.anime annual poll. Americans seem to love it or hate it—it's one or the other. And to this day, there are detailed discussions on the Internet about the meaning of the film, the meaning of particular scenes, and when you say that you regard the screenplay as weak, I think it may be possible that Americans may look differently at *WINGS* than the Japanese. How did Japanese critics react to the film? What did they



SIM WORLD

WINGS' alternate universe was created from the ground up—everything from trains and rockets to money, clothes and toothbrushes were redesigned for the film as features of a brand-new world that mirrors our own in many ways, but is far from exactly the same.

think?

Okada: Japanese movie critics only review live-action movies. The Japanese art scene doesn't address anime, and its critics have nothing to say about it. And when it comes to the anime magazines, all they ever say is "It's good, it's good, it's good!" That's all. ANIMAGE, NEWTYPE—they're all the same. They're just merchandising magazines. They do have a "Readers' Voice Corner," where people write in their opinions. Some readers liked *WINGS*, but in those days *PROJECT A-KO* was what most anime fans thought of as good, and such money-making anime was the type that was promoted in the industry, which put *WINGS* in a very difficult place. Some people said "It's very good!" But almost all said, "I can't understand it." And I can't...I can't understand why they can't understand. It is a very simple film. Maybe it's difficult for them.

ANIMERICA: I understand that Yamaga once said that Shiro never changes—it is his perception of the world that changes. In that respect, the film seems very balanced, as far as good and bad.

Okada: I call it realistic. Looking back, the film isn't about "good" or "bad" sides. It is realistic—but therefore also not so dramatic.

ANIMERICA: Probably the one thing people discuss most about the movie in America is the attempted rape scene—what does it mean, why did he do it...there are all kinds of theories. I think it's because it's so very shocking, so sudden.

Okada: That scene wasn't good technique. When I said the screenplay was weak, I was referring to such things. If *WINGS* had a stronger structure, the audience could always follow Shiro's mind, his heart, his feelings. But sometimes the film is undercut by a weak screenplay, and the audience ends up saying, "Oh, why, why, why? I can't understand Shiro—and of course, Leiquinni [LAUGHS]—what am I missing? I think the audience gets confused at three points in the film: the first scene, which is Shiro's opening monologue, the rape scene, and the prayer from space. Why? The film needed a stronger structure. A little more. A few changes, and the audience would be able follow Shiro's thoughts. But right now, they miss it, and that's a weakness. It's true that there will be ten or twenty percent of the audience who can follow it as it is, and say, "Oh, it's a great film! I can understand everything!" But eighty percent of the audience is thinking, "I lost Shiro's thoughts two or three times, or maybe four or five." Those are the kind of people who will say, "The art is great, and the animation is very good, but the story—mmmm..."

ANIMERICA: Well as an "art" film, if you compare *WINGS* to, say, the animated version of Miyazaki's *NAUSICAÄ OF THE VALLEY OF WIND*—which compresses a very long manga into a movie, and an ending where the protagonist becomes a messiah....I understand Yamaga has said specifically that he did not want an ending like that—that he did not want Shiro to become some kind of higher being. He would still be a human being. Even though he'd gone into space, he'd be the same person.

Okada: I know that we wanted to make it a very realistic film, so Shiro's speech from orbit never hurt anyone, and he came back from space to the planet, lived a long time, and died as an ordinary person. That was his only story. The film was Gainax's call to the world, of how we would be. The story of the anime is explaining why we are making anime in the first place. The lift-off of the rocket



LOUIE, LOUIE

The rowdy Royal Space Force making the most of their leave time in the pleasure quarter (above). Though some viewers will overlook the humorous undercurrent of the film and see only the serious story, sharp-eyed observers will note no less than three possible references to the 1978 movie *NATIONAL LAMPOON'S ANIMAL HOUSE*. Can you spot them? (Hint: they involve a flying bottle, push-ups and a vomiting scene.)



THE RIGHT STUFF

Former aimless slacker Shiro undergoes intensive astronaut training after accepting the role as pilot of the rocket (above) and prepares for liftoff (below).





WINGS OF DESIRE

ANIMATE COLLECTION 07: AILE DE HONNEAMISE is the thickest book on **WINGS** yet available, with a dramatic wraparound cover illustration by Yoshiyuki Sadamoto, which Manga Entertainment used for its U.S. video release of the film. The book contains 150 pages of the film's storyboards, with literally thousands of design drawings; a 20-page color section of background and concept paintings; extensive staff interviews (in Japanese); a timeline of Daicon Film and Gainax's production history. As an extra bonus, there's a small foldout poster of the Royal Space Force going crab-netting (no kidding!). Currently available in import only, **ANIMATE COLLECTION 07's** sticker price is ¥1500. Contact Books Nippan for more information at 1.310.604.9702 (ask for the animation department). ISBN: 494396607-1 C0274.



THE NEVER-ENDING STORY

ANIMAGE and **NEWTPE** are Japanese animation magazines that, along with similar publications such as **ANIME V**, **ANIMEDIA**, **MEGU** and others, are relied on by fans to keep up with their favorite anime. Aside from the glossy ads sported by each publication, the ratio of content-to-fluff varies according to each magazine; of the magazines covering all formats (OAVs, TV series, movies) **ANIMAGE** is generally accepted as the best source for more literary in-depth coverage (partly due to their status as Hayao Miyazaki's long-time publisher for the **NAUSICAA** manga), the heavily **GUNDAM**-focused **NEWTPE** (the name is no coincidence) is held as the epitome of splashy art direction, while **ANIME V** eschews TV or movie coverage to focus completely on OAVs and other video releases.



was only a preview of our future, when we were saying to ourselves, "Oh, we will *do* something!" But those feelings are mostly gone, just like memories, just like the person you were when you were young. It has *almost* gone away. But there is still the real thing, the film we made, that tells our story.

ANIMERICA: **DIRTY PAIR** creator Haruka Takachiho once cited **WINGS** as an example of the kind of high caliber of Japanese science fiction that most Americans don't realize exists [**ANIMERICA** Vol. 2, No. 5—Ed.].

Okada: Well, of course. **WINGS** began as a science fiction convention's opening film, after all. Four months after Daicon IV, I started thinking about what kind of film we had to make, and so it was in late 1983 or early 1984 that I found the name "Royal Space Force."

ANIMERICA: Yamaga has said (in **AILE DE HONNEAMISE**) that he was in a coffee shop in August of 1984 and heard someone ordering "Royal Milk Tea," and the title "Royal Space Force" just clicked for him.

Okada: Even Gainax's staff can get confused about this story. There's also a woman at Gainax who says it was she who got the idea for the title, and I think I found the concept. And Yamaga says it was he. No one knows what's the real story. In the end, we all just thought about the title "Oh, that's it! That's it." So, no problem. But interviewers always think, the director's the director. They never realize that at Daicon Film, or Gainax, there is *no* director, and *no* producer, and *no* animators, and *no* accountants. Everyone did those jobs, in the good old days of Gainax. So, what Yamaga says, the media likes to think these are the facts, and so "history" is made. But, in truth—no one knows, because **WINGS** was made in that kind of chaos.

ANIMERICA: What do you think makes Gainax so different from other anime studios? You're saying there's a lot of chaos....

Okada: Yeah. Gainax is not a professional film studio. Gainax is a super-amateur film studio, a super-otaku film studio. [LAUGHS] So it is different from the other anime studios. **GIANT ROBO** was an example of another studio wanting to make an anime with that Gainax "touch" or "feeling." But their staff doesn't have the confusion of ours. A Gainax animator thinks not only about motion, but about the editing, the lighting—that's very difficult, and because we do it, we are amateurs, as opposed to a professional studio with a strict division of labor. We all worked on all aspects.

ANIMERICA: But—even though you are, as you say, "amateurs," you still made **WINGS**. There are many anime films which you can see once or twice, and you'll never get anything more out of it. But **WINGS** you can see again and again, and notice more detail—not just in the artwork, but in the political, the social, the economic—you find more and more layers.

Okada: Yeah. Well, actually, there's another reason for the design complexity. Take, for example, Hayao Miyazaki's films. They're very simple to understand, yet very interesting and very good. That's because Miyazaki is a strong controller. One man does all the storyboard, the screenplay, directs the animation—he maintains control over everything. But in **WINGS**, or even **GUNBUSTER**, we didn't have that kind of control, because neither Yamaga nor Anno are that kind of strong director, as Miyazaki is. On a Gainax anime project, everyone has to be a director. Therefore, everyone's feelings and everyone's knowledge are going into it, creating all that detail. That's the *good* side of how Gainax's films are different from others. But we



have no strong director, and that's the weak side.

ANIMERICA: So you see the screenplay of **WINGS** as weak because of this chaos?

Okada: Yeah. That's why I say to myself, oh, maybe we can make just a *little* change in it. Because to make big changes, to have a *really* strong structure, we'd have to stop all the chaos, and instead of Yamaga, I'd have had to have hired a *real* director, the kind who can make all the decisions, just like Miyazaki. Anno, Sadamoto...they're only animators. But when it came down to finishing a film, *everyone* went to work painting the cels! Yamaga, Anno, Sadamoto, even me and my wife, and *fans* who came to Gainax. "Welcome to Gainax Films! You're safe in here! You're safe! Now you must paint!" [LAUGHS]

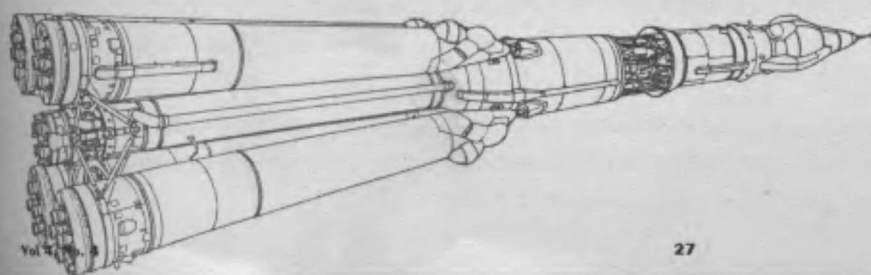
ANIMERICA: Incredible.

Okada: That's chaos. I think **WINGS** is a great film, but it has two faces—a good and a bad one. And the bad face is its weak point—it couldn't make very much money for Bandai.

ANIMERICA: I think that may be true if you only see **WINGS** once, but if you see it more times....

Okada: Yeah, but, most people never see it twice. We are the super-amateur film studio. But we had to compete in the battlefield of the professionals. And on that battlefield, you get one shot at the audience. We dismissed that when we designed the film, but after it was released, Bandai couldn't make their money back—it became *their* weak point. [LAUGHS] We made a good film—and maybe that should have been enough. Maybe so. But I'm afraid it's a...so...[SCREAMS] I'd make a few changes, perhaps.

Next: The conclusion of the ANIMERICA interview with Toshio Okada, where he discusses the dubious ad campaign for **THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE**, why he wanted Ryuichi Sakamoto for its soundtrack, his concept for a sequel and the "shocking truth" behind Hiroyuki Yamaga's concept!



WAX ON, WAX OFF

As shown in the famous scene in **OTAKU NO VIDEO** where the film's protagonists (read: Gainax) get dissed by a drunken passerby for waiting in line overnight for **NAUSICAA's** premiere, Gainax is a great admirer of Hayao Miyazaki's work (Gainax's own Hideaki Anno also worked on **NAUSICAA** as key animator, a point that was emphasized in **WINGS'** theatrical trailers). Okada, however, told a story at last November's AnimEast convention in New Jersey about a strange interlude their studio had with the director while **WINGS** was still in the planning stages. Miyazaki apparently knew something of their fan work (**WINGS** co-producer Shigeru Watanabe of Bandai confirms that his company had Miyazaki look over the four-minute "pilot film," **THE ROYAL SPACE FORCE**, that Gainax made in the spring of 1985 as an outline for their proposed feature film, i.e., **WINGS**. Miyazaki's reaction was that Gainax indeed had talent, but that Bandai was going to have to give them a lot of money) and invited some of Gainax's principle staff over to his home. Instead of discussing working together with Gainax on their anime movie, though, Miyazaki, in the best **KARATE KID** fashion, set the young men to doing chores, including fixing his roof. Afterwards, Miyazaki brought forth his proposal: he was interested in directing a live-action remake of his 1978 anime TV show **FUTURE BOY CONAN**, and, having observed Gainax's work around his house, asked if they'd be interested in working on the film as stunt men. Okada further maintains that months later, during the production stage of **WINGS**, Miyazaki would often appear in the dead of night (anime studios are busy around the clock) and talk members of Gainax's crew into leaving to work instead on his own movie, **LAPUTA** (1986).

