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

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.
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!”

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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 some-day, 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 SENSITACHI (“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?
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 Dennō Gakuen (“Cybernetic High School”) and Battle Skin Panic, and software versions of SILENT MOBIUS 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
AIKOKUSENTAI 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 KYORYUSENTAI JURANGER, 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 déjumasho 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 Tsuuburaya 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 "fokusatsu 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.