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 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.

Yoshiyuki Sadamoto’s vision of BLUE URU is the unproduced sequel to THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE
INTERVIEW WITH TOSHIO OKADA, PART FOUR OF FOUR

In Part Four, the conclusion of the interview, Toshio Okada 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!

ANIMERICA: There's something I've wondered about for a long time. You know, the ads for the film had nothing to do with the actual film!

Okada: [LAUGHS] Toho/Towa was the distributor of THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE, and they didn't have any know-how, or sense of strategy to deal with the film. They handle comedy, and comedy anime—what you would call cartoons. And they were thinking that this film must be another NAUSICAA OF THE VALLEY OF WIND, because NAUSICAA was the last "big anime hit." But when they finally saw WINGS, they realized it was not another NAUSICAA [PANICKED SCREAM] and they thought, "Okay, Okay...we'll make it NAUSICAA in the publicity campaign!" [LAUGHS]

ANIMERICA: At one time, the film was to be called "LEIQUUNI NO TSUBASA" instead of HONNEAMISE NO TSUBASA (THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE). What brought on the title change?

Okada: Okay, you should understand that, in Gainax, no one ever refers to this film as THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE. To them, its one and only title is its original one, ORITSU UCHÔGUN—"THE ROYAL SPACE FORCE." But Bandai said to us, "If you really want to call it that, it's fine—but we'll stop our involvement with it." So, we had to think about another title.

ANIMERICA: Bandai thought it was a bad title?

Okada: For them, a good title is NAUSICAA OF THE VALLEY OF WIND. [LAUGHS] That's a real title for an anime movie. It should be, "Something of Something."

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**ANIMERICA:** Like *FUSHIGI NO UMI NO NADIA* ("Nadia of the Mysterious Seas")?

**Okada:** Yeah. Exactly. So it was necessary that we came up with something like *THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE*.

**ANIMERICA:** Where did "Honneamise" come from? I've always wondered why they chose something that sounds French.

**Okada:** Yes, it's French, but it doesn't mean anything. [LAUGHS] When they ordered us to come up with another title, all we could think was that we were going to make an utterly meaningless title, "Honneamise"—meaning nothing.

**ANIMERICA:** Well, wasn't the name of Shiro's kingdom, "Honneamano"?

**Okada:** Yes, but we came up with that after the new name.—"Oh, *THE WINGS OF HONNEAMISE*...? What is Honneamise? Ah! Oh yes, it's the country's name!" [LAUGHS]

**ANIMERICA:** You just liked the sound of "Honneamise"?

**Okada:** It wasn't that it sounded right to us, but that it was a meaningless sound—so, we liked it. [LAUGHS]

**ANIMERICA:** Like "Kodak" or "Haagen Daz"—those names also have no meaning.

**Okada:** [LAUGHS] Yeah.

**ANIMERICA:** I like the little legend that was made up about "Honneamise," to explain it—about a bird who one day tried to fly to heaven and was turned by God into a fish for his temerity.

**Okada:** Yeah. Mr. Yamaga was drinking some whiskey, and thinking, "Oh, yes—the meaning!" The publicity people had told him that this new title had to have some kind of story behind it. He said to them, "Oh, yes—but—but—I'll have to have some drinks before I can come up with one!" [LAUGHS] And they said "Ohhhhhkay!" That's all.

**ANIMERICA:** So you chose that meaningless title because you didn't want to call it anything else in the first place?

**Okada:** Yes. On the LD box set, it's finally called *THE ROYAL SPACE FORCE*.

**ANIMERICA:** Concerning the music, why did you want to have Ryuichi Sakamoto for *WINGS* music? Were you a fan of his?

**Okada:** No, no. [LAUGHS]

**ANIMERICA:** You just thought he'd be good?

**Okada:** It's not that, but...In Japan, at that time, he was the only choice for an original movie soundtrack.

**ANIMERICA:** Why do you say that?

**Okada:** Composers for ordinary anime music can make a pop song, something
in the enka [Japanese "country music"—Ed.] style—you know, just songs, like an opening theme. But they can’t do orchestration, or a sad melody like "Leiqunni’s Theme." I didn’t really like Sakamoto’s style back then, or even now. But I know his talent, his ability to construct a strong score, and write an entire orchestration. That’s why I chose him.

ANIMERICA: Why not, for example, Jo Hisaishi, who composes the scores for Miyazaki’s films?

Okada: Jo Hisaishi always writes one or two melodies, and the rest of the soundtrack is constructed around them. You can see that in NAUSICAA and LAPUTA. But his kind of style wouldn’t have worked for WINGS. As I said—for better or for worse, the film has a very differentiated structure, and we needed a score to match that. So I told Sakamoto, “Don’t make the soundtrack all by yourself. You should direct it, but get a staff with real musical talent, young or old, and incorporate their work.”

ANIMERICA: Like harmony within the chaos. I see. Were you ever planning to make a sequel to WINGS?

Okada: Back during the 1987 premiere, Yamaga and I were talking about the next story of WINGS. It would be that world, a hundred years later. A spaceship from the world of WINGS then journeys to our present-day Earth, from their homeworld, four light-years from us.

ANIMERICA: Wow! Interesting! So they’d be ahead of us technologically. Four light-years...so the world of WINGS is around Alpha Centauri?

Okada: Yeah. Four light-years away.

ANIMERICA: But you never pursued that idea seriously?

Okada: Well, no one asked me. [LAUGHS] But when we’d finished WINGS, and were at the “premiere” in L.A., Yamaga and I were always talking about what the next stage of the story would be, one-hundred years after the original. On Earth, it would either be the present day, or the near-future.

ANIMERICA: You could set it in the GUNBUSTER universe and really screw up the timeline. [LAUGHS] Is it true, by the way, that GUNBUSTER is the future of NADIA?

Okada: No, not really. The similarities are because Anno was trying to get an idea...”Ohhhh...I’m not getting anything...” [LAUGHS] “I need a name for a spaceship...how about...something from...GUNBUSTER!” [LAUGHS] How about Elteum or Exelion?”

ANIMERICA: I think it’s more interesting to have NADIA be the past for GUNBUSTER. Because NADIA is already a parallel universe, and GUNBUSTER is definitely a parallel universe.

Okada: Yeah. I’m still interested in the hundred-years-later story of WINGS. But right now, it’d be almost impossible to make it.

ANIMERICA: What is BLUE URU about? What’s its story?

Okada: Have you ever seen STREETS OF FIRE?
Okada: That’s it.

ANIMERICA: What?

Okada: That’s it. There’s this girl singer, and this pilot comes with his airplane and takes her away, and then the hero, in his blue plane, comes to town [MIMICS TOUGH-GUY VOICE] “Uhhh! My girl has gone!” He gets very angry, gets some people together, and goes and saves her. [LAUGHS] That’s all.

ANIMERICA: This was Yamaga’s idea?

Okada: Yeah. So I said no. Never. I won’t make that film. [LAUGHS] Yamaga was very angry. [LAUGHS] But I said...

ANIMERICA: Oh, my God. That’s—that’s why, y’know, in MEGAZONE 23, they’re watching STREETS OF FIRE...!

Okada: Yes.

ANIMERICA: He really likes that movie?

Okada: Ahhhh....He thinks I do, too. [LAUGHS] So I said to him, if you don’t have any interesting ideas for me, the film isn’t going to get made. Yamaga is a very clever and talented man. But even he couldn’t come up with an idea he was really interested in, so instead he proposes this parody film.

ANIMERICA: Because he had no idea, he made a parody?

Okada: Because, in truth, he had neither the emotion nor the idea to make a new anime film. It was because of that I suggested to Gainax that they not make another anime film for at least two years.

ANIMERICA: Until you get new ideas...?

Okada: No. To have the right emotion. Not the “schedule” mentality, where you’re saying, “Oh, it’s spring, we’ve got to make a new anime film!” You should ask Yamaga someday, “Is it true that BLUE URU is STREETS OF FIRE? Okada says so.” He’ll be, “Uhhhh...Yes! No! Yes! No!” [LAUGHS]

ANIMERICA: Occasionally, I’ve asked Gainax’s translator to ask Yamaga questions for me about WINGS, and Yamaga has responded, “You know, I don’t remember—it was ten years ago.”

Okada: That’s probably the truth. I almost forget myself, because we saw the film two or three hundred times, and had so many different ideas about it. So you forget.

ANIMERICA: The last time I got information on URU from Yamaga, he said that he did not yet know what the story was going to be. So maybe he discarded that earlier concept, threw it away.

Okada: No, when he gave the synopsis of URU to the Pioneer people—Pioneer LDC was to be URU’s main sponsor—the story was almost exactly the same as STREETS OF FIRE.
ANIMERICA: You know, you haven't changed much, compared to your pose in the AILE DE HONNEAMISE book.

Okada: Ah, yes. This is the stance from JOJO'S BIZARRE ADVENTURES BAAAAAII!!! When I was young, I was stupid...forget it. [LAUGHS] ★

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