

← Back to Original Article

## His adopted home is called Treasure Town

*American Michael Arias has done the unheard-of: He's the first non-Japanese director of a major anime film, and his tale of a crumbling city has hit a chord.*

February 04, 2007 | Bruce Wallace | Times Staff Writer

Tokyo — "WHEN I was a beat cop this town had warmth to it; now it's stone cold," sighs Fujimura, a world-weary policeman in the animated Japanese film "Tekkon Kinkreet," dispensing the lament of those who have lived their lives in one place and resent the intrusion of change upon their utopia of familiar sights and streets.

But there still seems to be a lot of life left in Treasure Town, the phantasm of an Asian city brought to the screen by American director Michael Arias. Here, mechanical Buddhas with elephant heads join gangs, and lost boys battle for turf, while greedy developers from another planet work with the local mob to plow old neighborhoods under. But it is the city itself -- with its 24/7 glow, its temples and *tuk-tuks* and color-splashed skyscrapers with grotesque animal-head motifs -- that is the star of this critically acclaimed anime.

"We wanted to make the city the central character of the film," says Arias, an L.A. native who has spent 15 of his 39 years in Tokyo. He sculpted his images from the Tokyo neighborhoods he knows and loves but also borrowed from cityscapes in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Colombo, Sri Lanka, to give his metropolis a pan-Asian feel. He likens the clutter to "a big box of toys you just drop on the carpet."

"The chaos is very Asian: old stuff, new stuff, these amoeba-like cities that are constantly consuming themselves," Arias says of the setting to his directorial debut. "It's a parallel universe that is kind of like Japan. But it's not Japan." A bit like Arias himself, who speaks fluent Japanese and knows the culture well but has become a bit of a novelty here as the first non-Japanese director green-lighted for a major anime feature.

Arias began his career doing special-effects camerawork in Hollywood on films like James Cameron's "The Abyss" before moving into computer graphics and software development. In the mid-'90s, he developed a shading software program that gives computer animation the look of traditional cel drawings, first used on Hayao Miyazaki's "Princess Mononoke" and now a staple of the Japanese director's films.

And he took on the producer's role in "The Animatrix," working with the Wachowski brothers on a collection of nine animated shorts inspired by "The Matrix."

But "Tekkon Kinkreet" was the project he nurtured for more than a decade, a story originally told in a revered manga series from the mid-1990s by Taiyo Matsumoto. Arias finally agreed to direct it himself when it became clear that, as much as the anime community loved the manga, no one could match his obsession for turning it into a film.

The comic has a deeply devoted following, and bringing it to the screen was always going to be risky. But produced by cutting-edge Studio 4°C, best-known for its iconoclastic sensibilities, "Tekkon Kinkreet" has impressed Japanese critics with its suspenseful storytelling and riffs on the power of friendship in a crumbling world. The film has done respectable business at the box office since its December release, though it has a much smaller distribution than films by anime giants like Miyazaki. Despite anime's global cool, no one in the Japanese industry -- except Miyazaki -- is getting rich.

The film was three years in the making, with Arias virtually living in the studio in the last year and "only coming home on Sundays" to see his Japanese wife and two children. (Foreign audiences get their first look at this month's Berlin International Film Festival, where it is in competition for two prizes, including best first feature. Sony Pictures will soon decide what to do with its worldwide theatrical and DVD rights.)

"The American director described Japanese emotions and atmosphere very well," says Ryusuke Hikawa, a critic on national broadcaster NHK's show "Anime Night Talk," who called it "a wonderful movie." He added: "Scenes of old Tokyo and people's manners were well depicted and exactly fit the emotions of the Japanese. Of course the director had good Japanese staff members around. But even so, I wonder how he did it so well."

If the cityscape provides the heart of "Tekkon Kinkreet," then the relationship between the main characters, Black and White, provide its torn and tortured soul. Both are street urchins living alone in an abandoned car under an expressway. Black will fight anyone, as fearless of extra-terrestrial gangsters as he is of the cops. The snot-nosed White is a playful dreamer who shows childish glee even amid savage violence. "White is almost like a pet," Arias says. "All he gives you back is love."

Arias came across the characters in the mid-1990s, when he had returned to Tokyo after two years in New York, coming back to comfort a Japanese friend whose wife had committed suicide. They spent a lot of time sitting and smoking on the balcony, Arias recalls, watching the traffic flow and one of their favorite old buildings get demolished. Then the Aum Shinrikyo cult carried out its sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, unleashing panic and a surreal madness that turned the city into a frantic Bruegel canvas.

In this charged atmosphere, Arias' friend tossed him a copy of Matsumoto's manga, warning, "It'll make you cry." Arias was grabbed from the opening page, which showed Black and White perched on telephone poles surveying the wreckage of their town. "It felt just like what we were doing," he says, "watching this old, earthy city being torn down."

Much has been made of "Tekkon Kinkreet's" ode to the feeling of loss. The theme of destruction resonated with readers when the original manga was drawn, capturing the soul-searching that followed the popping of Japan's real estate bubble when the country looked at what it had lost during the 1980s development orgy.

Some critics have questioned whether land sharks and developers can still provoke alarm in a country that has finally shaken off the bubble hangover and faces new challenges. But others note that nostalgia for a "Japan lost" still stalks the land. Even as Japan's economy recovers, globalization threatens the old social compact by which the government propped up and preserved the traditional flavor of small cities and old neighborhoods.

And the vise of development has hardly disappeared from the rest of booming Asia, where audiences will surely connect with the sense of bulldozers run amok in "Tekkon Kinkreet's" metropolis. "Develop or perish," cackles the greedy developer to his underlings. To which even the gangster called Rat, whose specialty is waste management, warns nostalgically against forgetting "the people who love and were raised in this town."

Yet "Tekkon Kinkreet" is not a finger-wagging warning against "progress." "I'm not sure that trying to stop progress is worth it," Arias says. "Are you going to freeze everything in the state you like best? When you look out the window, all that stuff you thought would be there forever just isn't. Buildings will come down. People around you will die. You can't go back to that town you grew up in."

That may be a perspective that comes easier to an American living abroad, to whom home is a state of mind that frequently disappoints. "I saw this as Black's story," Arias says. "The city changing is not what matters. These kids have to live in the here and now, and this is about them finding each other. Black gets lost but discovers that maybe you don't have to live in a reptilian way. He finds that love for his buddy is a reason to live.

"Because what else is there when you look out that window?" Arias asks. "Only the people."

bruce.wallace@latimes.com

\*

Naoko Nishiwaki of the Times Tokyo bureau contributed to this report.