

'Animatrix' producer Michael Arias becomes the first foreign director to enter Japan's cult domain

By PATRICK MACIAS
Special to The Japan Times

Much has been written about how Japanese anime has stomped across the globe like an out-of-control juggernaut, scooping up legions of fans along the way. Such unbridled success usually results in cross-pollination; new talent floods in from far-flung shores, as was the case with the hordes of Europeans who swarmed to Hollywood in its golden age and still go there today. But Japan's anime industry has remained largely closeted, and certainly no foreigner has ever made the logical move of stepping behind the camera to seize the controls. Until now, that is.

Southern California native Michael Arias is the first foreigner ever to helm a feature-length anime film in Japan.

"No one was ever stupid enough to try before," he says of the distinction that defines "Tekkonkinkreet," his animated adaptation of Taiyo Matsumoto's cult-classic manga (published abroad as "Black and White").

Although "Tekkon" is Arias's directorial debut, the Japan resident of 15 years has long been active behind the scenes on a number of high-profile movie projects, including stints as a special-effects technician on James Cameron's "The Abyss" (1989) and "Total Recall" (1990). Arias, who admits that he's "not much of a draftsman," went into developing software, a career move that eventually led to work on animated films in the United States and elsewhere. His patented "Toon Shaders" plug-in (which gave 3-D computer graphics the look of traditional 2-D animation) helped bring life to some of the more fantastic characters in Hayao Miyazaki's Oscar-winning "Princess Mononoke" (1997). He says, "It brought my work to the attention of the industry in Japan and opened quite a few doors."

Arias formed a strong relationship with the cutting-edge anime production house Studio 4C and wound up as the producer of "The Animatrix" (2003), a package of short films inspired by "The Matrix" movie series. Says Arias of the project, "I'm not really cut out to be a producer, and there I was wrangling nine different animated films from different directors -- a lot of personalities. But it was great that I got to see a lot of aspects of the industry that I wouldn't have otherwise." Arguably more fun to watch than the two

disappointing live-action "Matrix" sequels that followed the original, "The Animatrix" is now the best-selling direct-to-video anime title ever in the U.S.

Soon after "The Animatrix," Hollywood started to take a noticeable shine to anime and manga. Quentin Tarantino spiced up "Kill Bill Vol. 1" (2003) with an animated sequence. Samuel L. Jackson provided the voice of the main character in the upcoming Japan-U.S. coproduction "Afro Samurai." Even Arias' old boss Cameron is trying to bring to the screen a live-action film based on the Japanese manga "Battle Angel."

Given his experience, Arias could have cashed in on the wave by attaching himself to a big-name project to further bridge the gap between Herculean Hollywood and the animation industry in Japan. Instead, for the last decade he has spent untold hours toiling on a single-minded quest to bring to the big screen Matsumoto's emotional tale of friendship and its stunning European-influenced artwork, which appeared in 33 installments between 1993 and 1994.

Rather than mount the project in Hollywood, where a watered-down version would probably (and almost did) result, Arias decided to make the film in Japan, where "there's less money, less time, but the ideas are better." Created in collaboration with Studio 4C, the story of two street orphans struggling to survive in an imaginary surreal Pan-Asian city called Takara Machi was named the No. 1 film of 2006 in the annual "Best of" roundup by the New York Museum of Modern Art's Artforum magazine.

Still, Arias believes that the Japanese anime industry, cooler than ever according to rest of the world, may be in danger of drying up at home. It's a good thing then that Arias is in Japan helping to keep it on track.

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