

Outlander gazes into Showa's soul

By MARK SCHILLING

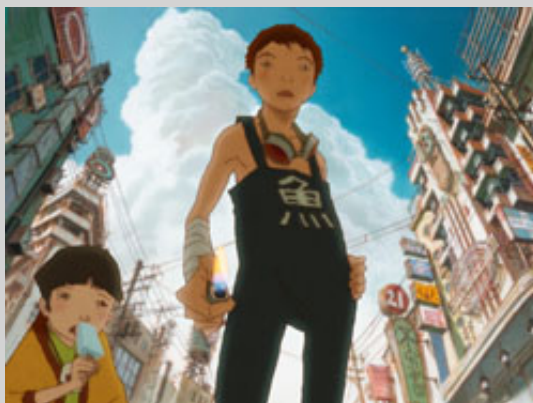
Kids have a natural attraction to places their parents consider dubious or outright dangerous: construction sites, abandoned buildings, weed-filled lots, stores selling junky or barely legal merchandise. The reasons are various -- the junior treasure hunter's search for loot, the adolescent rebel's guerrilla war against adult rules -- but underlying them all is the feeling that freedom lives in these marginal corners in ways it doesn't in the new, sterile places grownups consider safe, appropriate and "child friendly."

Michael Arias, director of the brilliant new animation "Tekkonkinkreet," not only understands this attraction, but has built his film's entire world based on it, using Taiyo Matsumoto's eponymous comic as his inspiration. Arias, a veteran CG artist who produced "The Animatrix" project, is American, but his filmic world here is deeply, nostalgically Japanese, looking like an alternative universe built from the more fantastic bits of Showa-era (1926-1989) architecture and design fallen into a tawdry grandeur.

Not a few Japanese animators have attempted something similar, from Hayao Miyazaki (the hot-springs resort in "Spirited Away") to Masaaki Yuasa (the funky Osaka neighborhood where the hero starts his adventures in "Mind Game"). Arias and his team, however, have gone farther in creating a richly detailed retro cityscape at once fantastic and recognizably real, populated by characters drawn with a spiky, uncutesy individuality. Arias is the Pieter Bruegel of *anime*. His main protagonists are street kids; the tough, canny Kuro (voice by Kazunari Ninomiya) and the childish, snot-nosed Shiro (Yu Aoi). Known collectively as "Neko" ("cat" in Japanese), this inseparable pair live in an abandoned car in a vacant lot and range about the ironically named Takara Machi (Treasure City). Theirs is the sort of paradise a latter-day Tom Sawyer might imagine: no parents or teachers, no schedules or rules, just endless exploration of the gloriously rundown neighborhood they love, with the bonus of superpowered legs that help them to fight spectacular turf wars with other urchins. The local cops, however, are more interested in the return of two *yakuza*, the world-weary "Nezumi" ("Rat"; Min Tanaka) and

Tekkonkinkreet

Rating: (4 out of 5)



(c) 2006 Taiyo Matsumoto Shogaku-kan
Aniplex Asmik Ace Beyond C

Director: Michael Arias

Running time: 111 minutes

Language: Japanese

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his hot-blooded young underling Kimura (Yusuke Iseya). Far more sinister, however, is the aptly named Hebi ("Snake"; Masahiro Motoki), an evil genius with a plan to redevelop Takara Machi. The crude, grasping local gang boss is on his side, but Hebi faces two formidable opponents: Nezumi, who is nostalgic for the Takara Machi of his youth, and Neko, who may be children, but represent potent symbolic resistance to his plan. And not only symbolic -- the three giant hit men Hebi sends against the boys find them surprisingly hard to handle. But then Kuro is wounded and the cops take Shiro away. Hebi's triumph would seem to be at hand.

This thriller plot is overblown to the point of absurdity, but Arias keeps its theatrics from overwhelming his deeper themes, including the importance of "place" to the soul (even a lost one like Nezumi's), the tug-of-war in Kimura's gangster heart between his loyalty to a superior and his love of a woman, and the testing of brotherly bonds between Kuro and Shiro (even though they are not related by blood). Arias animates his action scenes with a breathtaking verve, sending his characters flying up the sides of buildings or tumbling into city canyons unscathed, as though they were the unkillable cousins of Wile E. Coyote. But for all of the acrobatics -- and the generic plot devices that set them in motion -- the focus remains on human relationships, particularly those of the oddly matched pairs of heroes, who may start on opposite sides, but are alike in being *of* Takara Machi, not merely *in* it.

Arias, an outlander, may seem a strange choice for this quintessentially Japanese material, but he makes it accessible for those who know nothing of Showa-era Japan beyond its pop-culture echoes.

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