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Tekkonkinkreet

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By RUSSELL EDWARDS

Strained metaphysics dovetail with urban and architectural nostalgia in the exquisitely realized, minutely detailed Japanese anime "Tekkonkinkreet." L.A.-born and Tokyo-residing helmer Michael Arias has visual-effects credits running from benchmark Miyazaki anime "Princess Mononoke" to Hollywood blockbuster "The Abyss," as well as a career in developing Sega computer games; Asia and animation fests will regard his first anime feature as a must-see. Theatrical prospects will be confined to niche outlets, but a bonanza awaits in international ancillary.

On the street of an unnamed city, literally high-flying urchins Black and White look to protect their turf from invasion from other gangs. While he can be tough in a fight or wielding a weapon, White is an 11-year-old who can't even dress himself. Slightly older, Black is more worldly and treats his buddy with paternal love. Both look on their city as "our town."

Also prone to seeing the city as his property is world-weary yakuza leader Suzuki, aka the Rat. Feeling the town has become too placid, Suzuki plots his return, much to the consternation of local police.

Though Suzuki causes some criminal chaos with his henchmen, his connection with the city is authentic and loving. The zodiac-obsessed Suzuki is an affectionate counterpoint to the real villain of the piece, the slightly surreal Mr. Snake.

Snake is acting on behalf of property developers who wish to level the old city (including Suzuki's beloved red-light district) and replace it with a gargantuan amusement park. For reasons that are not fully explained (but suggest that Black and White are, metaphysically speaking, the true soul of the city), Snake's gentrification plans can't fully be implemented while the two feisty street urchins are in his way. To dispense with them, Snake engages brutal assassins from another planet.

Yarn has a tendency to shift gears for no apparent reason, but core story employs philosophical attitudes about being true to all aspects of one's personality that will appeal to a youth audience.

The apocalyptic "2001"-style finale heralding Black's journey into himself allows art director Shinji Kimura ("Steamboy") to really rip loose.

While setting is never named, city closely resembles 1950s Tokyo with a touch of New Delhi and sci-fi thrown in. Backgrounds are a detailed treat that must have required extensive photo reference, but have a vividness that mere copying of photographs can't provide.

Helming is fluid, giving the animation an extra sense of momentum and life. At fest sesh caught, sound design was top-notch. Title is a Japanese pun on concrete, iron and muscles.

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