

SF Animation at Its Best
 Make Way For
STAR BLAZERS
 BY JAMES H. BURNS

Star Blazers is an exciting, animated space adventure," says John Claster, president of Claster Television, the company that syndicates the show. "I mean, it really is a space program. A lot of the other series are just junky superhero programs where the bulk of the action takes place on or surrounding Earth. In our show, the majority of action takes place in space."

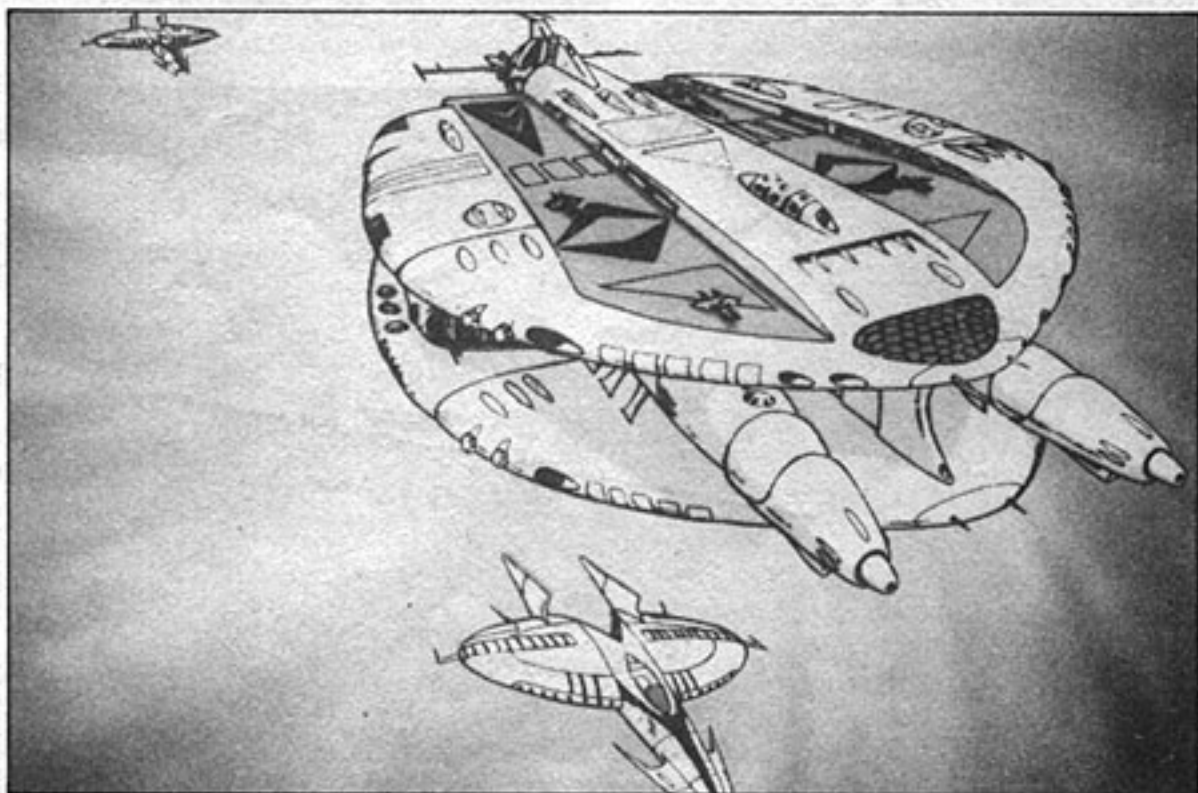
Star Blazers is the sleeper science-fiction series of the year. While everyone's attention was turned toward network projects like *Buck Rogers*, *The Martian Chronicles* and *The Lathe of Heaven*, *Star Blazers* burst on the scene ostensibly as a daily "kiddie" show, but has since won nearly unanimous acclaim from SF fans.

The series opens in the year 2199, when Earth is threatened with extinction by the evil Gamilons, an alien race led by Desslok, a diabolically clever commander intent on destroying the human race and ruling the Universe. But there is hope for Earth when her people receive a message from Queen Starsha of the planet Iscandar, informing them that if a group of humans can reach her home, she will give them a device that will save their world. The Star Force, an elite group of scientists and adventurers, is united to journey to Iscandar in the spaceship *Argo*. The Star Force is composed of Captain Avatar, an aged, sea dog-type commander who realizes that due to his ailing health, the journey to Iscandar could be his last mission; Derek Wildstar, the *Argo's* idealistic second-in-command who wants not only to help rescue Earth, but to avenge the death of his older brother, who was killed by the Gamilons; Nova, the beautiful radar operator of the

ship, whose secret love for Derek Wildstar finally blossoms and is returned; Mark Venture, the chief of operations of the Star Force who shares a friendly rivalry with Wildstar; IQ-9, a robot with a sense of humor who takes over "when the human mind fails or when human emotions make action impossible;" Sandor, the *Argo's* chief mechanic who is really a cyborg; and Dr. Sane, the ship's medical officer, and the only one "capable of keeping Captain Avatar going when he is ill and exhausted."

While *Star Blazer's* main plots may seem like standard space opera, it is the show's superb subplots and characterizations that

give it its distinction. As the series progresses, we witness Derek Wildstar's evolution from a brash young man into the *Argo's* strong and wise commander. The ensuing romances between Wildstar and Nova, and Venture and Trelaina are handled with surprising subtlety and sensitivity. Even the deaths of Star Force members and their friends' reactions are shown more realistically than in most treatments of similar events found in prime time television. These elements, combined with the show's soap opera-type serial format, make *Star Blazers* one of most entertaining space dramas ever created—animated or otherwise.



The spacefighter carriers of the Comet Empire move in against the *Argo*.

ART: COURTESY CLASTER TV

A Cult Phenomenon

Star Blazers was originally produced in Japan under the title *Space Cruiser Yamato*, by Yoshinobu Nishizaki in 1974. In the wake of the program's original two-season run, *Space Cruiser Yamato* has gone on to become one of the most popular television series in Japan's history. The show's cult following is even larger than America's *Star Trek*

phenomenon, and has become so intense that *Space Cruiser* has grossed \$25 million from merchandising alone.

Despite *Space Cruiser Yamato's* quality and native success, it wasn't until 1978 that the show's American audience was guaranteed when the Westchester Corporation purchased its syndication rights.

"I had screened a couple of episodes of

Space Cruiser Yamato in Japan," remembers Bob Marcella, head of the Westchester Corp. "I got the rights by initially dealing through Ken Fujita, who was representing Yoshinobu Nishizaki. The reason why Fujita was representing Nishizaki was that Fujita was the first man to introduce Japanese animated shows in America. He did *Astroboy*, *Speed Racer* and *Marine Boy*. I was interested in the merchandising of *Star Blazers* here in the United States, so I licensed Claster Television to syndicate the series domestically.

"Westchester had identified *Space Cruiser Yamato* to us as a good kids' property," Claster continues. "After we looked at it, we agreed with them. We reached agreement with Bob Marcella and the other people in September of 1978 to bring the show to air for the '79/80 season."

Before *Star Blazers* could be aired in the United States, the show had to be dubbed and re-edited to fit American television standards. Claster Television hired Griffin-Bacall Advertising to handle the process, since the company has extensive experience in dubbing sound for commercials. Instead of just doing a standard adaptation, however, Griffin-Bacall went to great lengths to actually *improve* the original series.

"We provided the *direction* for *Star Blazers*," says Tom Griffin. "We had translations of the original episodes, but instead of using those, we decided that we would approach the task of rewriting them. Much of what was in the original scripts wasn't idiomatic to the American market. So we restructured *Space Cruiser Yamato*, not only in terms of specific language on a scene-by-scene basis, but some of the basic series elements as well. The main problem was that the Japanese had made *the ship* the hero of the series. *Space Cruiser Yamato* was very mechanically oriented. We chose to refocus the series and the heroic elements more toward the crew of the ship—the Star Force—specifically Derek Wildstar."

An American Facelift

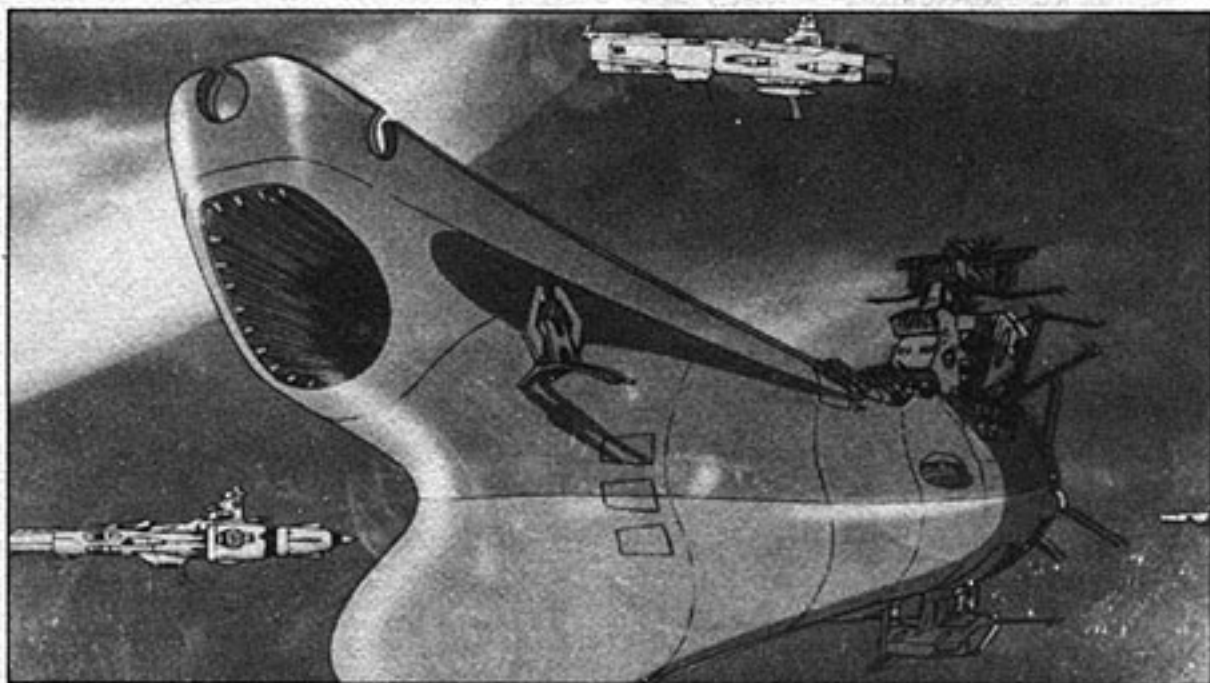
Fundamental alterations included name changes: the *Yamato* became the *Argo* (hence the series' title change), Admiral Jyuzo Okita became Captain Avatar, Susumu Kodai became Derek Wildstar, Yuki Moro became Nova, Daisuke Shima became Mark Venture, Sanada became Sandor and Dr. Sado became Dr. Sane.

"Breaking the series down to a suitable format was a long process," Griffin continues. "It involved first understanding what the pictures said and then trying to rewrite the script to fit the characters' rather limited mouth movements to get a new story. We also augmented the sound effects substantially; we added a whole new layer of sound."

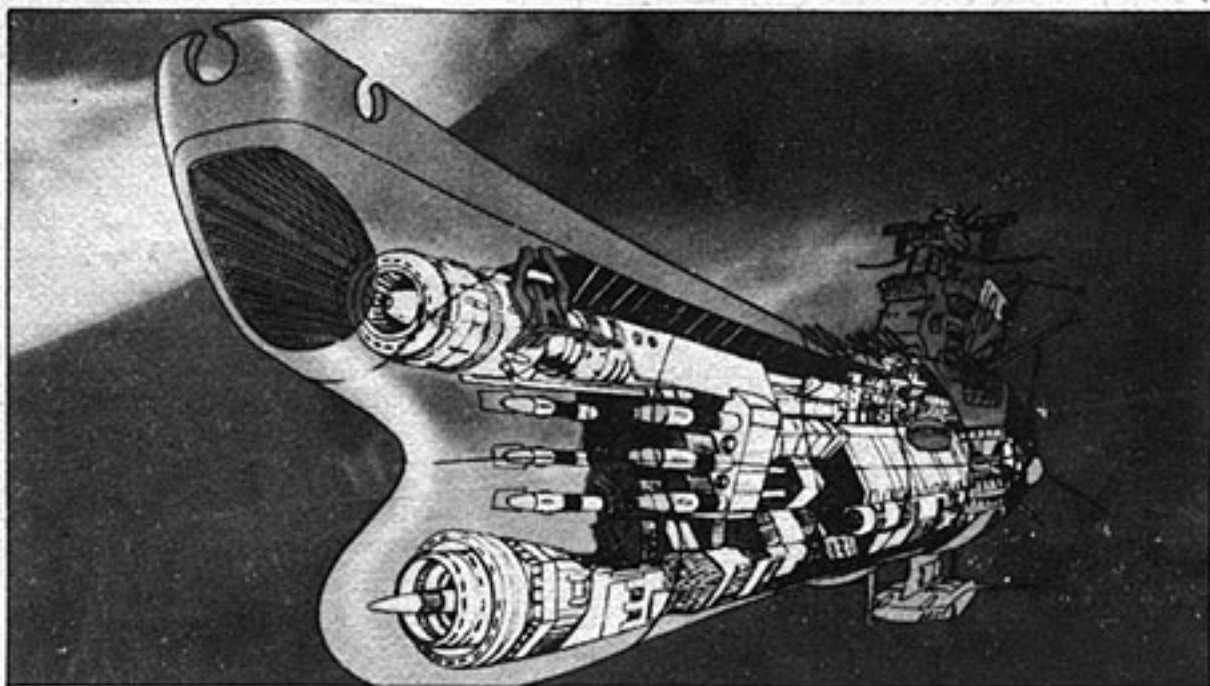
Another difficulty with adapting Japanese shows is that the country's censors permit more violence than is allowed on American television.

"Fortunately, *Space Cruiser Yamato* was not as involved with violence, as compared to most programs that come over from Japan," says Claster. "It was tastefully done."

"We *modified* the violence that was in the



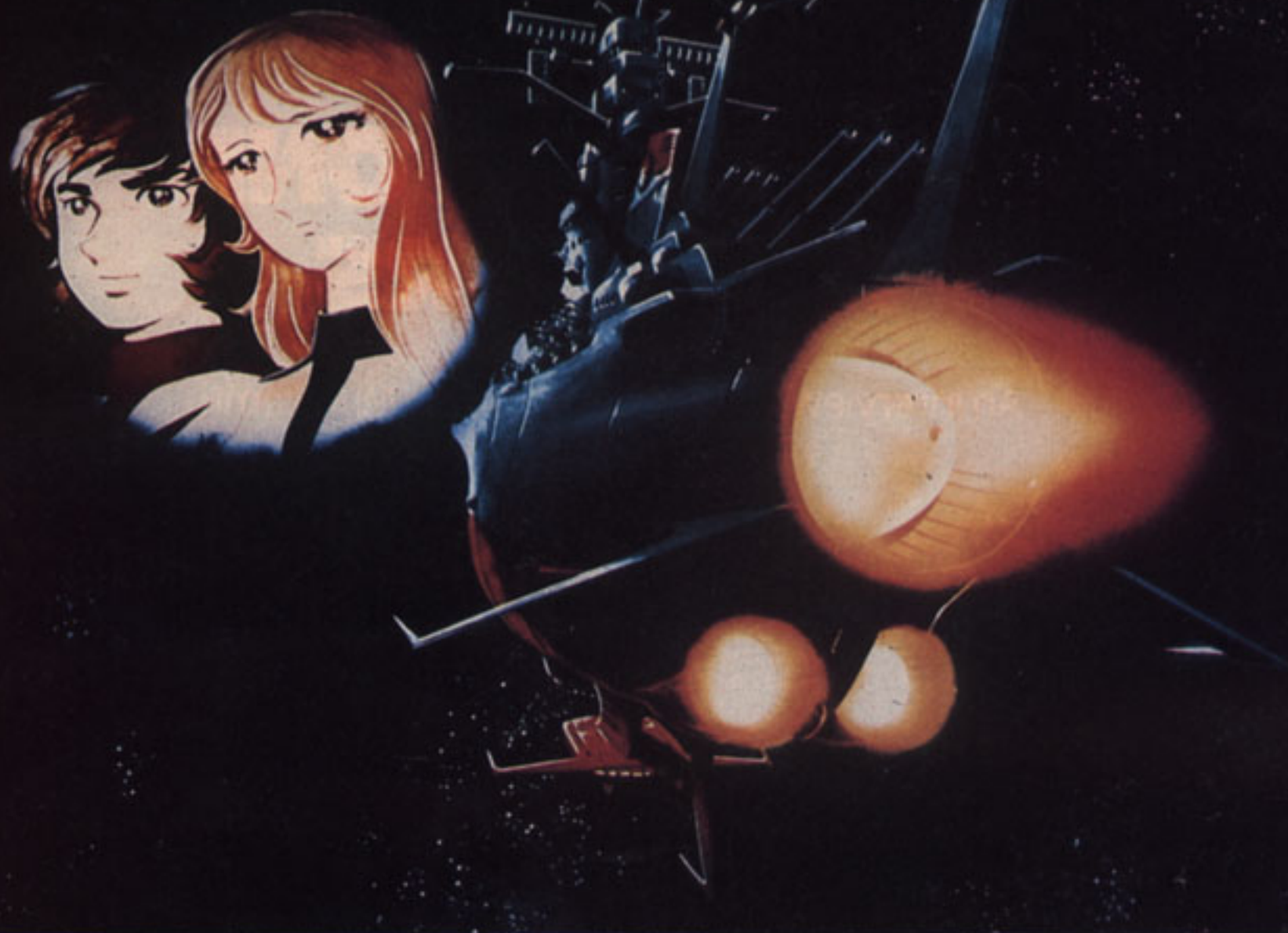
The *Argo*, pride of Earth's defense fleet.



Cut-away of the *Argo's* interior.



Comet Empire bombers devastate Earth's newly rebuilt cities.



During the 52 episodes currently shown on U.S. TV, audiences watch as Derek Wildstar (above left) grows as both a man and a leader. By the second season he takes command of the *Argo* (right) following the death of Captain Avatar. His relationship with Nova (above middle) grows from friendship into love.

show," explains Griffin. "For example, we'd make battle casualties robots instead of humans. We took out much of the *personal* violence, like characters getting shot. It wasn't a simple task. We often had to go fishing somewhere else in the series for a particular scene to cover up a plot element. But we were left with a lot of action which is the nature of the series in that there is a lot going on without violence *per se*. *Star Blazers* is much more of an odyssey in space than a space adventure."

One element Tom Griffin didn't have to alter was *Space Cruiser's* quality animation. While Japanese cartoons have been detrimentally affected by rising production costs since the *Astroboy* days, the art design and techniques utilized in *Star Blazers* are still far superior to what's displayed in current American cartoons.

"The Japanese take great time on the animation," says Marcella. "Some of the animation cels that they've sent over from *Star Blazers* are just *unbelievable*. The amount of time and effort the Japanese put into *each cel* in order to get that contrast on television is just incredible."

"The Japanese even used a 3-D-type effect," adds Griffin. "When they showed a meteorite belt, they'd used traced photographs of rocks and asteroids. It was treated like a rotoscope, but the rocks were shown in the *foreground* rather than the *background*. That made for a very *striking* and *dimensional* effect."

Inspiration, Not Rip-Off

Since *Star Blazers* debuted on American television last fall, many viewers have noticed the series' strong similarities to *Star Wars*: Derek Wildstar and Luke Skywalker; showing space battles as stellar dog fights; royalty in distress, the Comet Empire and the *Death Star*; Prince Zordar's and Governor Moff Tarkin's costumes; and IQ-9 and R2-D2. Some magazines have gone as far as to call *Star Blazers* an "unimaginative rip-off of *Star Wars*," not realizing that the Japanese series preceded the Lucas epic by almost three years.

"George Lucas *supposedly* [although there are those who say *definitely*] spent a great deal of time in Japan before he did *Star Wars*, looking at these kinds of shows," says John Claster. "I can't prove that, but there are an awful lot of similarities between *Space Cruiser Yamato* and *Star Wars*. There are even a larger number of similarities between *Star Blazers' second 26 episodes* and *Battlestar: Galactica*. I believe that both projects were influenced by *Star Blazers*."

It's not presently known if Yoshinobu Nishizaki or the Westchester Corporation plan to sue George Lucas and Universal. For the moment, Bob Marcella is more concerned about the future success of *Star Blazers*. The program has apparently been hurt by a malady common to science-fiction television: programmers not knowing how to handle it.

"*Star Blazers* has done very well in many markets," says Marcella, "and, in fact, we

just sold it to four more countries, but our statistics show that *Star Blazers* does best with the young adult audience, the people of school age. Unfortunately, many of the stations air the series when they wouldn't be home."

Despite *Star Blazers' American* hassles, *Space Cruiser Yamato* continues to be one of Japan's most popular television shows. Yoshinobu Nishizaki has just finished production on 26 *new* episodes that reportedly depict Desslok and the Star Force uniting against a common enemy that threatens the existence of both humans and Gamilons. Marcella would eventually like to import this third season, but is currently going to concentrate on getting *Star Blazers* seen by a wider segment of the American public.

"I'd like to enable a larger portion of adults to be able to see the show," says Marcella. "For the adults, I think *Star Blazers* would work best as it was originally presented in Japan: once a week. I'd like to try to get it into the late Saturday afternoon time slots when *Star Trek* is often run, so that the people who enjoy *Trek* would also get to see *Star Blazers*. Somewhere down the line, we might even release theatrical versions of the series. After all, *Star Blazers* has a more sophisticated appeal than most shows of this type and it would be a shame for it to be wasted."

And, despite their cosmic conflicts, that's a sentiment even the Star Force, Gamilons and Comet Empire could agree on. ★