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OTAKU EDITORIAL

Blazed and phased

A hoy there, sailor! Patrick here, sitting in my usual place on the bridge: at the control panel of Issue 4 of your favorite magazine (and mine) *Otaku USA*. As I caress the trigger of this wave motion gun controller softly and lovingly, I suddenly wonder to myself, "My oh my, isn't this issue quite the cat's pajamas?"

Maybe after spending a while a waltzing through our myriad pages, you'll be thinking something awfully similar. After all, we've managed to capture some rather large prey this time out. *Naruto* to name one, *EX MACHINA* to name another, with lots of other interesting fiddly bits in-between.

Oh, and we have a feature on this old show from the 70s and 80s you may have heard about called *Star Blazers* ... I'm kind of fond of it myself. "What exactly is a 'Star Blazer' supposed to be, exactly?" Tomohiro Machiyama asked me with the usual scorn and skepticism the other night, just after a rant about how crazy it is that the guy's name is actually supposed to be "Speed Racer" instead of having a more sensible and easy to pronounce name like "Go Mifune."

I guess that was when I realized how odd and random the title for *Star Blazers* really was. It could be the name of a cocktail, a human rights violation, or the punch line to a very rude joke. Instead *Star Blazers* was the American version of *Space Battleship Yamato*, an anime that had changed ... well, just about everything in its native country of Japan after it originally debuted in 1974.

When *Star Blazers* finally made it to US TV, it made quite an impression in our own star-spangled backyard as well. At first, it was just another cartoon for programmers to shove in between bouts of prehistoric *Bugs Bunny* shorts and moldy old prints of *The Flintstones*. There probably wasn't much more of an agenda than that. You know, like changing the paradigm of popular culture or anything.

Still, everyone who saw *Star Blazers* was affected differently and suitably dramatically, but there's no real way to gauge the full impact the darn thing had. All I have is my own story to join the probably millions of others like it ...

Even when I was a grubby little kid in short pants, I was vaguely aware that some of the really cool cartoons on the TV were coming from Japan, a la *Speed Racer* and *Battle of the Planets* ... and that there were a lot more where they came from. American sci-fi magazines like *Starlog* would occasionally run pieces on all these amazing looking anime that, my luck being what it was, I'd probably never wind up seeing ... especially that one with the big flying space battleship.

But one day, I flipped on the TV. And there, between prehistoric *Bugs Bunny* shorts and moldy old prints of *The Flintstones*, were Derek Wildstar and Mark Venture picking up the very dead remains of Sasha, who had perished trying to deliver a message of hope to the people of Earth—the first episode of *Star Blazers*! From there, the show taught me everything I needed to know about how rad anime actually was. To pick just a few examples out of the ether:

- Characters, heroes included, could die. You know, just like real people? This never happened on *Scooby-Doo*.
- Continuity means nothing. You have to see (collect?) multiple versions of the story to get the big picture. Since it was hard to see all the movies, manga, and whatnot in America, this made following an anime storyline a very involving (read: nerdy) process.
- Villains could have complex motivations ... or at least more so than Solomon Grundy on *Challenge of the Super Friends*.
- "War is bad, but space battleships are great."

That last tidbit came from a friend in Japan, someone I may not have ever even met in a country I may not have ever traveled to if *Star Blazers* hadn't put "the whammy" on me first and turned me into a stark raving anime freak begging for more. Maybe *Naruto* is already having the same effect on today's audience? I certainly hope so! Will the lessons about anime they glean be their own, or just endless reiterations of the territory that *Star Blazers*, ahem, blazed first (see what I did there?). I dunno ...

But this I do know. I wanna see where this whole weird journey of Japanese pop culture winds up next. So put on your Star Force uniform and saddle up.

Enjoy and savor the fourth issue of *Otaku USA*! See you all in 2008 ... and in outer space!

OTAKU USA
Volume 1, Number 4

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Leiji Matsumoto's cover art for the original collected edition of his *Space Battleship Yamato* manga depicting Susumu Kodai (aka Derek Wildstar) in all his cosmic splendor.

I was in the 5th grade when *Space Battleship Yamato* first aired on Japanese television back in 1974. But I have to admit that I didn't really get it at first. I wasn't the only one. The show disastrously failed to find an audience when it originally aired. There were many reasons, but most of all it was because *Yamato* was not made for kids. In the early 70s, the Yomiuri Television network was bravely exploring animation shows for young adults even though such people weren't in the habit of watching animation. In 1971, in the same time slot that *Yamato* was broadcast in, they had previously aired *Lupin the 3rd*, a notorious sex and violence noir with lots of nudity. No wonder it was a disaster, because the slot was 7:30 Sunday evening. In spite of that, Yomiuri Television gave the green light to *Yamato*.

In *Yamato*, there were no child characters. There was no obvious hero that kids could root for. The main protagonist seemed to be Susumu Kodai (*Derek Wildstar* in the US version, *Star Blazers*) but he was just one of the crew without any special powers or abilities. Although sometimes he pilots a fighter plane or shoots a laser rifle, most of the time he just sits at the control panel on the bridge. The scripts were full of technical and military terms that kids couldn't understand. And the mood was too serious and dark for little ones.

After being bombarded by the evil Gamilus alien planet bombs (nuclear weapons, basically), the whole earth is dying. The battleship *Yamato* has to go to the faraway planet Iscandar to get the Cosmo Cleaner radiation neutralizer in just 365 days, otherwise human beings will be extinct. The situation was so intense and desperate that it was hard to find the lighter side of the story. Also, anime at that time was very episodic and didn't rely on continuing storylines like *Yamato* did. If

you started to watch *Yamato* during the middle of the series, it wasn't easy to figure out what was going on.

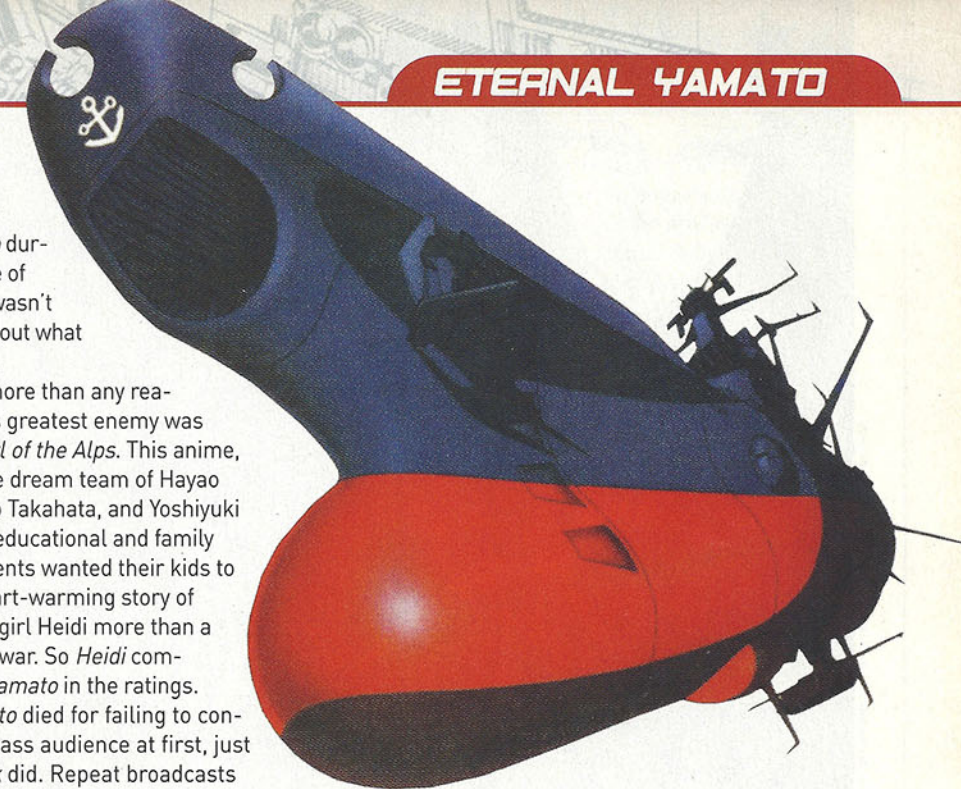
However, more than any reason, *Yamato's* greatest enemy was *Heidi, The Girl of the Alps*. This anime, created by the dream team of Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata, and Yoshiyuki Tomino, was educational and family oriented. Parents wanted their kids to watch the heart-warming story of the little nice girl Heidi more than a violent space war. So *Heidi* completely beat *Yamato* in the ratings.

Thus *Yamato* died for failing to connect with a mass audience at first, just like *Star Trek* did. Repeat broadcasts would be key to giving both series a second chance at life.

Reruns of *Yamato* started soon after the first run ended. The time slot moved to 5:30 in the evening Monday to Friday, a magic time for Japanese animation. That's when the kids come home from the playground, dad is on his way back from work, and mom is cooking in the kitchen. The main thing is to just be quiet and not bother her. Kids could watch whatever they wanted. And fortunately, other than *Yamato*, there were only programs for small kids. *Yamato* just happened to be the only program that could attract teenagers. The audience finally began to grow in size.

But it still took several years for *Yamato* to become the massive hit that it eventually became. Back in those early days, very few homes had VCRs. Super rare video copies of *Yamato* were shown to less than 100 people at

ETERNAL YAMATO



Yamato and the beginning of anime fandom

This issue, we're off to outer space, protecting Mother Earth, to save the human race, and all that jazz. Welcome aboard our massive *Space Battleship Yamato* / *Star Blazers* super-spectacular!

The Birth OF a Nation

By Tomohiro Machiyama



ABOVE: Movie poster for the release of *Space Battleship Yamato The Movie* from 1977.

OPPOSITE LEFT TOP: Leiji Matsumoto, at home, drawing, and possibly thinking about World War II ... right now.

OPPOSITE LEFT BOTTOM: Producer Yoshinobu Nishizaki surrounded by adoring female representatives from the *Yamato* fan club.

OPPOSITE RIGHT: The crowd queues up for the opening of *Space Battleship Yamato The Movie* in 1977. See if you can spot Tomo cutting in line.

science fiction conventions. *Yamato* dojinshi (or fanzines), already existed, but the whole scene was very underground and had little impact on regular society.

The next step on the road to the *Yamato* craze happened when a handful of fans created a special issue of a magazine called *OUT*. By then,

OUT went back to its regular format, and the sales dropped back to normal. *OUT* soon made another special anime issue and it sold out again. People began to realize that teens and young adults needed their own print media about anime. This was the genesis of the anime magazine market.

By 1977, the *Yamato* movement had finally unified. The Fan Club was organized and it made a petition begging *Yamato* producer Yoshinobu Nishizaki to screen a re-edited theatrical version of the original TV series. Their thousands of signatures finally convinced him to release *Space Battleship Yamato: The Movie*. I went to see the film at the Shinjuku Toei Theater in Tokyo. The line of fans stretched for more than four blocks before the day of release. They were all teenagers and adults. The mainstream media covered the craziness with great surprise. They'd never seen anything like this before. Not only was the film just animation, but also it was a re-edited version of a TV show that people could see for free at home. Was it really worth it to line up and see? The newspapers and TV reporters didn't know what the *Yamato* movie really meant to the audience.

This was the very first big meeting event for anime fans in Japan. Always in the minority at science fictions cons, anime fans had never before met a group of others like themselves. They couldn't find friends who liked anime at their school, but they definitely knew the fact "We are not alone" at the theater that day. And maybe, there was no other place they could fit into society. We fans couldn't express these ideas, but we could feel them in our guts. It was the beginning of the otaku movement that we know today: the birth of a nation. It was a very historical moment. And without *Yamato*, there would be nothing.

That same day when I was in line for the *Yamato* movie, producer Nishizaki showed up to see the crowd. Someone spotted him. Can you guess what happened next? The fans began chanting his name and raising their arms in the way of a fascist salute! They were treating him just like Dessler (*Star Blazers: Desslok*), the villainous dictator in *Yamato*. "Nishizaki! Nishizaki! Nishizaki!" If the fans had never done this, maybe he would have gone on to have a normal life as just another producer. Instead, Nishizaki began to see the *Yamato* fans as his own private army and the source of a power he could claim as his own. After the *Yamato* movement began to get attention from the media, Nishizaki suddenly stepped forward and said, "I created *Yamato*!" But he *didn't* create *Yamato*, the way George Lucas created *Star Wars* or Gene Roddenberry created *Star Trek*. He was just the producer.

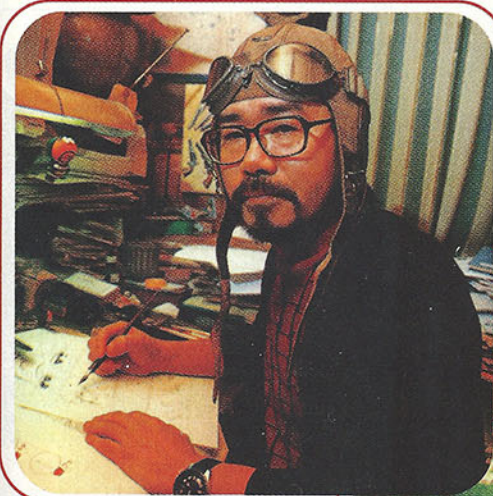
The key idea of *Yamato*—a World War II battleship in outer space—is believed to have originated with manga artist Leiji Matsumoto, who

worked closely on the series. Matsumoto obsessively tends to place anachronistic machines in deep space in his works, like the steam train in *Galaxy Express 999*, or the pirate sail ship in *Captain Harlock*. Moreover, if you look deeper into the psychology of *Yamato*, you will find Matsumoto's complex feelings about WWII and nationalism.

Matsumoto created lots of WWII comics, like *The Cockpit* series, and they are unusual among Japanese comics. Since losing WWII to the USA, Japan has been prohibited from having its own military by the constitution. Schoolbooks and most media, including manga and anime, have depicted Japan and Nazi Germany as an evil fascist alliance that was rightfully defeated.

On the contrary, in Matsumoto's war comics, the heroes are always Japanese or German. Matsumoto tried to justify their actions by showing the ethical behavior of the individual soldiers themselves. His message seemed to be, "Even if you hate the Nazi party and the Japanese Imperial system, you still have to respect the guys who fought in the trenches." But in these same comics, Americans are always depicted as stupid, weak, cruel, ugly, and cold-blooded racists. So his outlook is not fair and is totally biased.

However, *Yamato* is not so simple. If anything,



it's actually even more political and complicated. Contrary to the multiethnic crews of *Star Trek*, the *Yamato*'s crew is all-Japanese. It's not just that there are no non-Japanese earthlings shown during the whole *Yamato* saga. Other countries have already been annihilated by Gamilus. And the final hope of the earth (Japan) is the *Yamato*, a restored WWII battleship that was the final hope of Japan in 1945. The *Yamato* was the biggest battleship in the world and was expected to save Japan by destroying America with its huge guns. Sadly, *Yamato* was sunk by the Americans before it could do barely anything. So, resurrecting the ship was a very Japanese pipe dream.

Also, you have to remember: the word "Yamato" is from the ancient name of the Japanese nation. We call Japanese spirit "Yamato Damashii" and the ultimate deed of this spirit is the kamikaze attack. To make things even more twisted, the enemy that drops bombs on Earth in *Yamato* is based on Nazi Germany, not America. By having Japan fight the Nazis in a rewritten version of history, the war can finally be justified.

After the media took note of the *Yamato* boom, they began to blame the series for being nationalistic and ethnocentric. The ending of the second film, *Farewell to Space Battleship Yamato*, was attacked by the critics. Concerned adults started to wonder, "Why are the young kids so interested in the ghosts of World War II? We educated them that it was a mistake and it was a bad thing!"

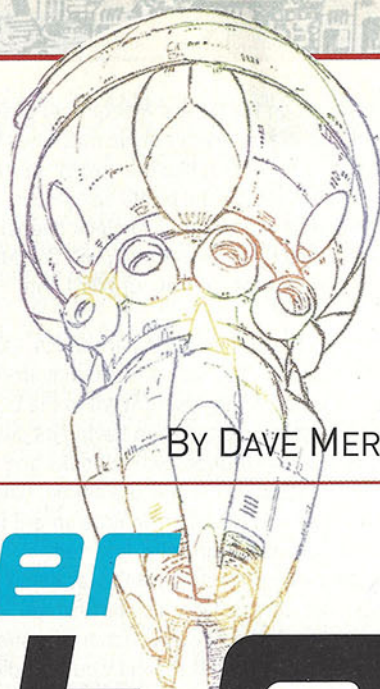
Japan's image was trashed after World War II. We'd tried to invade Asia. We'd lost, and felt very weak, and were now slaves. Japan became a

kind of culture of self-loathing. And it wasn't healthy, especially for Japanese kids who couldn't blame themselves for the mistakes of an older generation. They felt, "I didn't do anything, but why do I have to hate myself for being Japanese?" So *Yamato* said it was OK to be Japanese. We needed that kind of fantasy, like Americans needed *Rambo: First Blood Part II* to feel better about Vietnam. But don't worry so much. We anime fans were not so stupid.

The second theatrical movie ended with *Yamato*'s kamikaze-style attack on the enemy. That was Nishizaki's idea. He romanticized the suicide attack as a honeymoon for the characters of Kodai and Yuki (aka Wildstar and Nova). Matsumoto was reportedly disgusted at it. So were fans. The movie was a hit, but Nishizaki's manipulations and increasing interest in militarism made us all skeptical.

The real *Yamato* was built because of the Japanese Navy's misconception. They believed, "If you make a huge ship with a huge gun, you can win the war." They didn't realize that the era of the battleship had already passed. The US was now concentrating on air power. Actually, the real *Yamato* was destroyed by hundreds of small airplanes, like an elephant killed by a swarm of bees. After WWII, Japanese people changed their way of thinking to the opposite. They started to make small but high quality products. Finally, their small cars and electronics beat America's huge machines.

Yamato did the same thing. Thirty years after its sinking, it crossed the ocean as *Star Blazers* and fired the first strike of anime fandom at America. ●



BY DAVE MERRILL

Remember Yamato!

SPACE BATTLESHIP YAMATO I THE QUEST FOR ISCANDAR

TV SERIES/26 EPISODES/1974-1975

The kids in my fourth-grade class were excited about this great new cartoon that just started in the after-school slot. I was dubious. Everybody knew the only good cartoons came on Saturday mornings and involved the Road Runner or Super-Friends. But my curiosity was piqued. Twenty-eight years later I'd listen to the director of this show describe how the producer wanted the colors darker, always darker, and remembering that first glimpse of the *Yamato* wheeling itself around to aim its wave-motion gun at the Gamilas artificial sun, I can recall how oddly sophisticated it all looked. Everything about this show was a window to a whole different universe of cartoons, one that I instantly wanted to be a part of. Looking back at the 1974 series it's painfully clunky; the animation is spotty, the continuity is suspect—just how many Cosmo Zero fighters does that ship hold, anyway?—and its 70s pedigree radiates out from every bell bottom and miniskirt. However, the heroic tragedy of the *Yamato* overcomes those obstacles, in defiance of planet bombs, reflection satellites, or Desslar Cannons. This episodic drama of Earth's struggle for survival was definitely something new, and the world of animation would never be the same. Hurry, Star Force!

SPACE BATTLESHIP YAMATO THE MOVIE

FEATURE FILM/130 MINUTES/1977

They say compilation films never work, and they're almost right. Chopping 26 TV episodes down to a single theatrical film is always a challenge, but when you've got a straightforward story of Earth under severe attack from the mysterious planet Gamilas, the job's pretty simple: get to Iscandar. Nishizaki cut this film twice; once for the post-*Star Wars* Japanese market, and a second time as an abortive pre-*Star Blazers* dub released theatrically in England (*Space Cruiser*) and straight-to-television in the States, where it confused fans for decades with its lackluster dubbing and whimsical char-



A hitchhiker's
guide to the
greatest
anime space
adventure ...
EVER

ABOVE: Promotional art created for 1984's *Final Yamato*. Pretty, huh? LEFT: Susumu Kodai from the character model sheets for 1980's *Be Forever Yamato*. OPPOSITE: Artwork created especially for the Laser Disc re-release of *Space Battleship Yamato The Movie*.



RIGHT: 1979's *Yamato The New Voyage* asked the question, "What would a really, really bad day for Leader Desslar be like?" BELOW: The cast of *Yamato* assembles to take on the Comet Empire for the second TV series. If Zordar's plot should work, he'll destroy the universe, don't you know? OPPOSITE: The marriage of Kodai and Yuki! The return of Captain Okita! Galaxies in collision! It's all just grist for the mill in 1984's *Final Yamato*.



acter names. Okay, so Starsha's a ghost now and Desslar doesn't make it off Gamilon alive—sometimes victory still tastes like ashes. Is this movie just an appetizer to prepare you for the TV episodes, or is it all you need to know about the Quest for Iscandar? You decide.

FAREWELL TO SPACE BATTLESHIP YAMATO: SOLDIERS OF LOVE

FEATURE FILM/151 MINUTES/1978

Did fainting Japanese fangirls really throw bouquets of flowers at the screen during the climactic moments of this film? I wasn't there, I can't say. What I can say is that this film elevated cartoon sci-fi tragedy to an art form. The *Yamato*, already slated for the salvage yard, launches in defiance of orders. Her crew searches its soul, makes stirring speeches, and (*spoilers*) dies heroically in flaming sacrifice to Universal Peace. The mission: to answer a message from space and battle an unstoppable White Comet controlled by Emperor Zordar, an evil fellow with amazing eyebrows, and his empire of cruel generals, scarred marshals, and consorts who may or may not be blood relations. The Yoshikazu Yasuhiko (*Gundam*) character designs work well on top of Matsumoto's originals and the animation is certainly a step up from what we saw in Series 1. If you aren't standing at attention while tears stream manfully down your face as the images of the fallen *Yamato* crew parade past Kodai (*Star Blazers: Wildstar*) piloting the *Yamato* toward its rendezvous with destiny, you, sir, are made of stone.

SPACE BATTLESHIP YAMATO 2: THE COMET EMPIRE

TV SERIES/26 EPISODES/1978-1979

Some fans feel the *Yamato* series should have ended with the previous *Farewell* movie. Those people are called "quitters." Can the crew of the *Yamato* launch in defiance of Earth Defense Command and search out the mysterious, now-clothed Teresa (*Star Blazers: Trelaina*)? Will the uneasy alliance between the Comet Empire and Desslar destroy *Yamato*? Does the Space Cavalry really eat punks like you for breakfast? All is revealed in this, the TV iteration of the *Farewell* movie, in which half the cast doesn't die and the awkward, halting romance between Teresa and Shima (*Star Blazers: Venture*) tugs at the heartstrings. Sure, the Earth surrendering to the berthed Comet Empire, conveniently

waiting in Tokyo Bay, has disturbing echoes of a certain other surrender 256 years previous, but it's a reference that we choose to read as regret for a tragedy, not a wish that the Pacific War ended differently. Experts agree this series marks a high point for television animation drama, as Kodai and Desslar face off at gunpoint aboard the flaming ruins of the Gamilas flagship. The struggles between the *Yamato* and authority, the rivalry between Kodai and Cavalry leader Saito (*Star Blazers: Knox*), the inner conflict of Desslar's soul—all are resolved in 26 episodes of what might be, pound for pound, the best anime show ever!

SPACE BATTLESHIP YAMATO: THE NEW VOYAGE

TV MOVIE/95 MINUTES/1979

You can see the *Yamato* machine start to tick over into cruise control here as soap opera starts to crowd out the space opera. You'll get that fan-fictiony feeling as *New Voyage* answers the unasked question; what if some grayish, vaguely explained aliens blew up Gamilas and hurled Iscandar into deep space, and Kodai's brother was still there married to Starsha, and they had a little girl, and Desslar was still carrying that torch for the Girl On The Planet Next Door? What if all that? Well, you'd have *New Voyage*. The character designs have reached their standardized peak—away from the brushy, eccentric Leiji Matsumoto look and toward the 1980s anime style that would fit in with everything from super robots to magical girls. But the story fits right in with the patented *Yamato* formula of romance, tragedy, sacrifice, and villains disappearing in glowing slow motion explosions. It's tempting to dismiss *New Voyage* as merely a TV movie lead-in to *Be Forever Yamato*, but details like the enka music soundtrack, Tokugawa's (*Star Blazers: Orion*) earnest son taking his dad's place in the engine room, and Desslar and Kodai's windswept deep-space heart-to-heart give this one a charm all its own.



BE FOREVER YAMATO

FEATURE FILM/145 MINUTES/1980

A lovely epic of a film that I never could quite figure out. Did the *Yamato* actually go into the future via the Dark Nebula and battle our own android descendants, or is a society technologically advanced enough to field a space armada, build Double Nucleus Bombs, and construct a full-size replica Earth really stupid enough to make clumsy mistakes in art reproduction? Isn't building an entire fake planet Earth going through a hell of a lot of trouble? Why not just live on the fake instead of conquering the real one? Is it because Earth is the most beautiful planet in the universe? Knowing *Yamato*, that's probably so. One thing's for sure: if you want to make destroying a space station look as totally sweet as possible, send in the Cosmo Tigers and crank up the soundtrack, and remember to make sure the theater projectionist knows what to do when entering the Dark Nebula's "Warp Dimension." The gorgeous animation, the sweeping visuals, the speedily matured fan-service character of Sasha, and a slick new romantic lead with a deep dark secret attempting to woo Yuki (*Star Blazers: Nova*) away from her beloved Kodai all combine to make what many believe is the high water mark of the *Yamato* saga.



DID FAINTING JAPANESE FANGIRLS REALLY THROW BOUQUETS OF FLOWERS AT THE SCREEN DURING THE CLIMACTIC MOMENTS? I WASN'T THERE, I CAN'T SAY. WHAT I CAN SAY IS THAT YAMATO ELEVATED CARTOON SCI-FI TRAGEDY TO AN ART FORM.

SPACE BATTLESHIP YAMATO 3: THE BOLAR WARS

TV SERIES/25 EPISODES/1980-1981

This ambitious saga of ecological destruction and galaxy-wide warfare had trouble finding an audience in the expanded Japanese anime market of 1980. Was it a victim of oversaturation, or did the public need a furlough before setting out on another mission? This series made it to America as a "third season" of *Star Blazers* in a few mid-decade markets, long after any momentum it might have gained from the original American release and minus the original Westchester voice crew. To be fair, any *Yamato* TV show is going to find it tough competing with *Yamato 2*. Judged on its own merits, *Yamato 3* is a competent space opera with a refreshing dose of realpolitik and a little *Yamato* world-building, what with your secret Japan Alps bases and your new characters and planet Galman which turns out to be the ancestral home of Desslar and the Gamilas. The galactic religious revival and other story elements give hints of the more complicated, mature show that got axed somewhere halfway through the season. Perhaps the Bolar Commonwealth lacked the iconic menace of, say, the Comet Empire, but let's face it, sometimes the face of evil honestly is really just banal. However, they do have a great theme song. And let's not forget the slick remastered Voyager DVDs, which look better than the broadcast ever did.

FINAL YAMATO

FEATURE FILM/150 MINUTES/1984

If it weren't so undeniably gorgeous, I'd say this movie was way too long and riddled with emotional button pushing of Spielbergian proportions. But this king-size finale gets the job done with style and grace, if not speed. Glowing galaxies, stellar phenomena, planets of water engulfing other planets not quite so damp, special animation effects bursting everywhere, and sailing through it all animated in beautiful ones and twos is the *Yamato*. The old girl has never looked better, standing up against devil worshippers from outer space and their immense orbital super-constructions, which are revealed to the audience in long, slow, detailed, slow, majestic, slow tracking shots that go on and on and slowly on. So get comfortable, you're not going anywhere. The terrific music score works hard to keep things moving, and the Spanish guitar—yeah, Spanish guitar!—delivers in ways you never thought possible in a film about a space battleship's struggle to keep Earth from suffering yet another Biblical flood. Tragedy, comedy, heartbreak, hyper-radiation missiles, and a last-minute save via everybody's favorite blue space dictator, capped by the *Yamato* itself sinking slowly beneath the waves of the outer-space ocean—it adds up to the majestic, slightly ponderous space opera that is Y-A-M-A-T-O. For extra-embarrassing fun be sure to catch the bonus footage of Kodai and Yuki finally consummating their decade-long relationship. Yeesh! Saraba, *Yamato*! ●

All *Star Blazers* and *Space Battleship Yamato* titles are available on video from Voyager Entertainment. Warp over to www.starblazers.com for more information.

Inventing Yamato

Director
Noboru
Ishiguro
on making
anime
history

BY TIM ELDRED

IF you're an anime fan, you have Noboru Ishiguro to thank for it. Either you've seen his work or you've seen something directly inspired by his work.

Ishiguro's résumé speaks for itself; starting as an in-betweenner on the original *Tetsujin 28* (aka *Gigantor*) way back in the 60s, he moved up the ladder on such classics as *Marine Boy*, *Star of the Giants*, and *Combattler V*, and reached his pinnacle with the founding of Studio Artland, birthplace of such anime juggernauts as *Macross*, *Orguss*, *Megazone 23*, *Legend of the Galactic Heroes*, and much, much more.

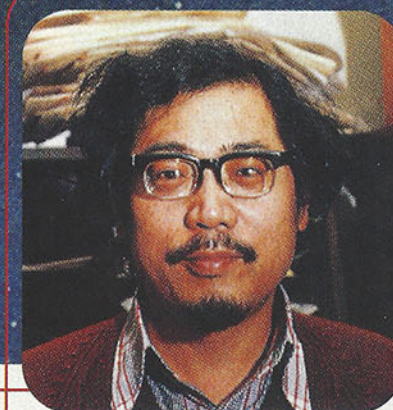
People in the anime industry (and most other industries, for that matter) generally fall into one of two categories: auteurs or workhorses. The auteur's name is as well known as his work. But without the workhorse, there can be no auteur. Ishiguro is just such a workhorse, as evidenced by both his long list of credits and the long list of auteurs who have relied on him for over 40 years. In this interview, Mr. Ishiguro discusses his most famous production of them all, *Space Battleship Yamato*, aka *Star Blazers*. Joining the staff of Yoshinobu Nishizaki's Office Academy at *Yamato*'s time of inception put Ishiguro on a path that would create a generation of anime fans around the globe. So you see, you really do have him to thank!

What brought you to the attention of Producer Nishizaki and convinced him to hire you for *Yamato*?

The year before *Yamato*, I was directing Mushi Productions' last title, called *Wansa-Kun*, which was produced by Nishizaki. After Mushi-Pro was disbanded he had another project in mind, so he started to call upon people he knew, and that's how I got involved.



ABOVE: Kodai and Yuki, two "warriors of love" from *Farewell to Space Battleship Yamato*. Art by Yoshikazu Yasuhiko of *Mobile Suit Gundam* fame.
OPPOSITE: Iconic "uchu roman" promotional art from *Farewell to Space Battleship Yamato*.
INSET: A portrait of the artist as a hard-working animation director: Noboru Ishiguro, circa 1978.



What was *Yamato's* stage of development when you joined the staff?

That would be back in the spring of 1974. The project pitch was already drafted and the title was already *Yamato*, but the design was not the same as the *Yamato* we know. Back then it was still a clump of asteroid, a piece of rock that was the spaceship. The ship-form of *Yamato* came about when Leiji Matsumoto joined the staff. I joined when the asteroid-shaped rock version of *Yamato* was being transformed into the Leiji Matsumoto design.

Your first project at this time was to animate a 10-minute pilot film, which was financed by Mr. Nishizaki, and was the very first time any of *Yamato* was committed to film. What were the challenges you faced in doing this?

We were very short on time and we had to somehow scrape up the resources to make it. During the production the character designer/animation director coughed up blood and collapsed from a stomach ulcer. So we had to somehow come up with a way to fill in his role and continue with the production. Also at this time we didn't have a solid design for how Gamilas (*Star Blazers: Gamilon*) or Desslar (*Star Blazers: Desslok*) should look, so we were arbitrary about that. We didn't know that they were supposed to be blue-skinned.

Who worked with you to make the animation?

The atomic explosion from the planet bomb was done by a new animation director named Toyoo Ashida, and he worked on a very long 20-second explosion. It was so long that we had to overlap it with the next scene. (Note: Ashida would go on to become a major designer and director in later years, making his mark with the original *Vampire*

Star Blazers REBIRTH

By Patrick Macias

An enormous black hole is on a collision course with our solar system! What's more, this massive destructive force seems to follow a preprogrammed path, meaning someone (or something) is deliberately steering it our way! Unless a certain Space Battleship and its crew can intercept the black hole and find out who, or what, is behind it, the Earth will be destroyed in exactly one year!

But wait ... wasn't the *Yamato* itself blown up for good at the end of the film *Final Yamato*? Yeah, but that's far from the end of the story, at least according to Tim Eldred.

Tim is a professional comic artist and ani-

mation storyboard artist who has worked on the *Spider-Man* and *Teen Titans* TV series in addition to creating his own acclaimed comic *Grease Monkey*. Now, Tim is the author of the officially sanctioned web comic *Star Blazers Rebirth*, viewable online at www.starblazers.com. Oh, I almost forgot to mention. Tim is also a stark raving *Star Blazers* fanboy! One of the biggest, in fact!

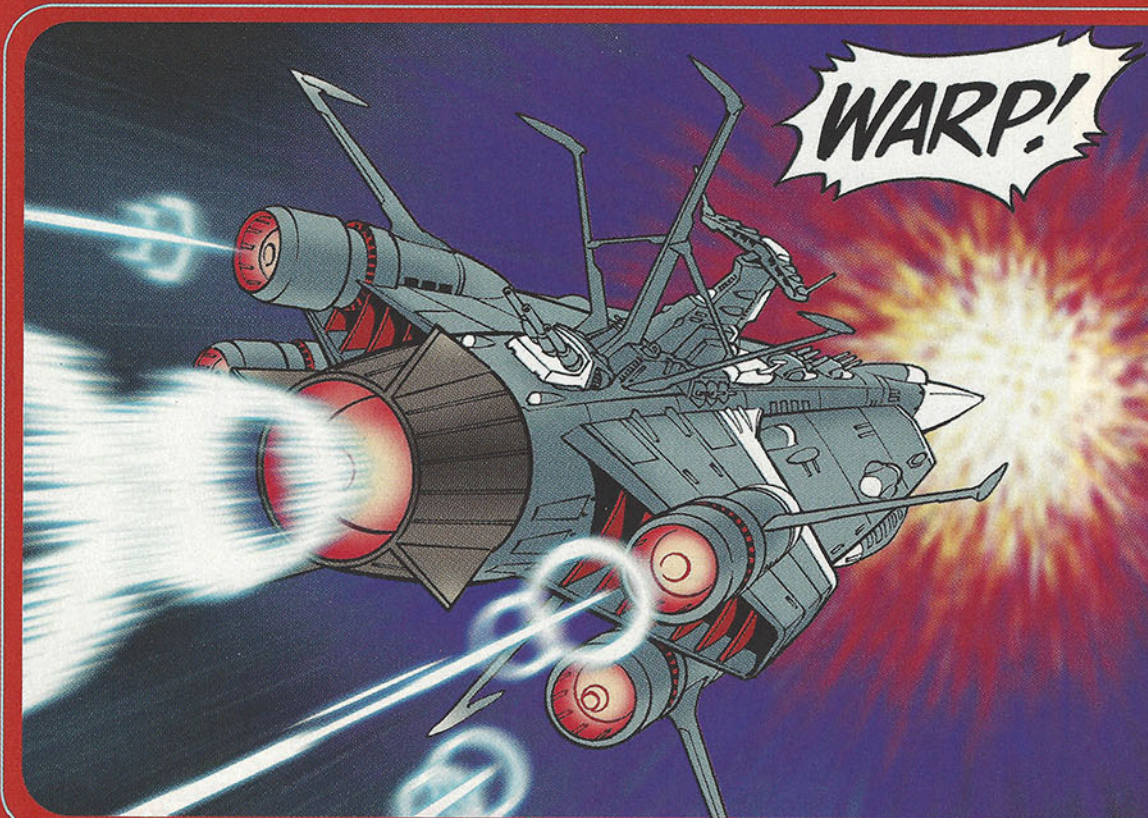
Set 20 years after the explosive conclusion of *Final Yamato*, Eldred's imagination sees the *Yamato* painstakingly restored piece by piece from within the frozen remains of the water planet Aquarius. Its captain is a bearded

Derek Wildstar who is now in late middle age, haunted by both the apparent death of his wife Nova and the passing of so many beloved comrades over the years. Meanwhile, a new generation of crew members steps on board for this dangerous mission. They include Wildstar and Nova's daughter Miyuki (a dead ringer for her mother), a hotheaded helmsman named "Bruce Merrill," and a veritable army of new IQ-9-type robots.

Through his connections at Voyager Entertainment, the US rights holders to *Star Blazers*, Eldred has spent the last few years creating content for the recently redesigned *Star Blazers* website as well as helping to produce the *Star Blazers/Yamato* DVDs for the US.

Having already mined all the original *Yamato* TV episodes, feature films, and ephemera for gold, it was time to move into a new frontier. Says Eldred, "When (rights holder) Barry Winston was given the rights to *Star Blazers*, he was told that he could generate new material ... but it had to stay *Star Blazers*. Because of a complicated rights issue, he's not able to create *Yamato* product. And this led to the creation of the new *Star Blazers* web comic."

In some ways, the new *Star Blazers Rebirth* web comic is an adaptation of a *Yamato* anime we never got to see. Tim explains, "A while back, the Japanese were developing a new series called *Yamato Rebirth*. It was going to have all the original characters and the original ship. But for many reasons, it just never got off the ground. Yet it was still developed up to a certain point. They had a story outline and a lot of designs. So 10 years went by and *Yamato Rebirth* was dead in the water, but all those concepts still existed and there was nothing



standing in the way of me taking those ideas and running with them."

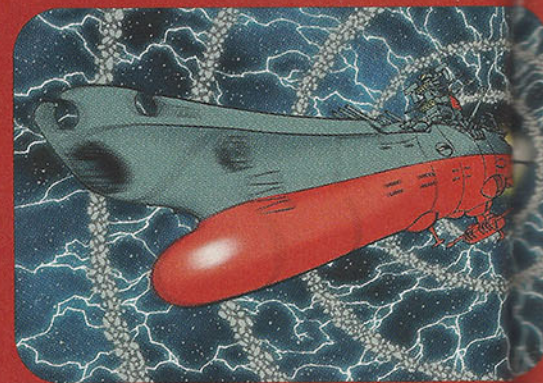
The circle is now complete! The fanboy is now the master of his favorite universe. As Tim puts it succinctly, "If I could take this conversation and send it back in time 20 years, I wouldn't believe a word of it." ●

Read *Star Blazers Rebirth* online at www.starblazers.com

ABOVE: The *Andromeda II* warps out to assess the threat of the black hole.

OPPOSITE LEFT: New helmsman Bruce Merrill dares to trash-talk the *Yamato* (I mean the *Argo*) to Dr. Sane's face.

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Our favorite space battleship breaks free of the remains of the water planet Aquarius.



Hunter D.) The collapsed girl from Iscandar was drawn by Leiji Matsumoto himself. Back then he would actually show up at the studio, and we got along well working together.

How did the pilot film prepare you for TV production?

Compared to the actual *Yamato*, the color scheme was much brighter than what we're used to. That was Nishizaki's demand. He wanted darker and darker colors, so finally we had to come up with special color mixes just for *Yamato*. Also, most of the opening title sequence was recycled from the pilot.

When the production began on the TV series, what was your job title, and what were your responsibilities?

The title they gave me was animation director,

and the title of director went to Leiji Matsumoto. However, Mr. Matsumoto was a manga artist, not an animator, and he was not versed in the ways of the studio so I ended up taking the entire job as director. It was fun, but at the same time it was a lot of work for me.

Yamato was a very unusual program at the time it was done. It was the first space fantasy program that anyone tried to do on that scale. Did you develop new animation techniques for *Yamato* that didn't exist before?

I don't know if "new" would be the appropriate term, but I always loved science fiction ever since high school and I always wanted to work on a science fiction anime. The television industry in Japan back then considered anime to be something for children, so there was little chance to do realistic science fiction. So when I got the

chance, I had no hesitation. There were a couple of ideas that I always wanted to implement in animation, such as how a ship would travel in space, or how explosions would look, so I put all those ideas into the production.

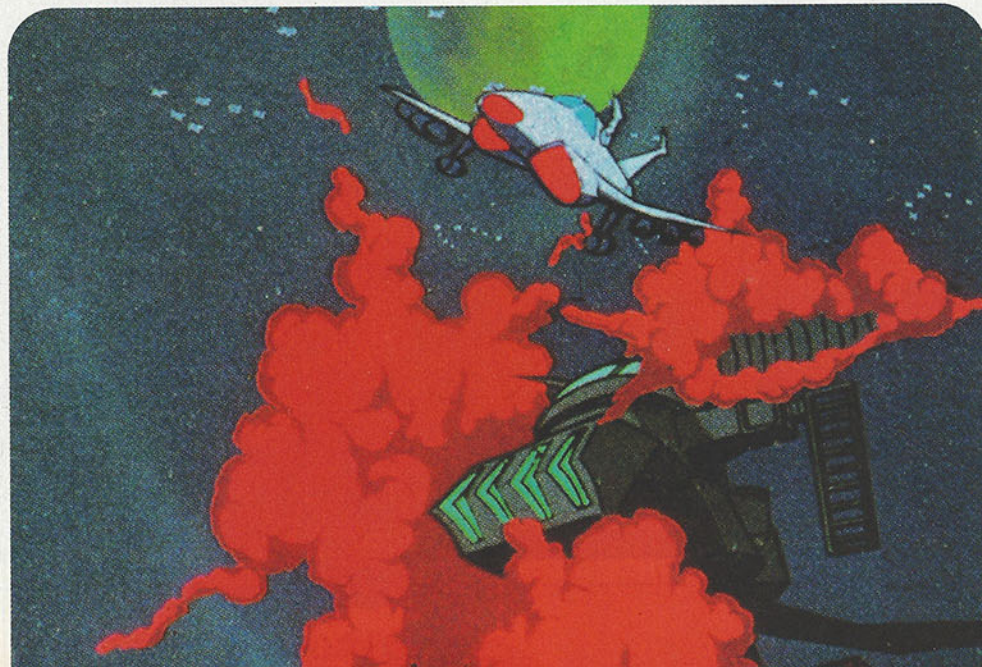
How did your job evolve as *Yamato* went on?

My job didn't really change much from beginning to end, but what I remember most was the production going on for 10 months and not being able to go home much. But aside from that, there were very few animators who were versed in the concepts of science fiction, so I had to teach that to all the staff and by the end of production I could leave it to them and be assured that they would get it. And it might be hard to believe today, but back then no one in the anime industry besides probably just me and the people at Studio Nue (who contributed design work

to *Yamato*) knew anything about science fiction, so evangelizing SF concepts was a lot of work for me.

Is it true that the deadlines were so tight that an episode would be finished only the day before it had to be broadcast?

In fact, we were relatively still on good time if we could finish a film the day before broadcast. A lot of times we ended up delivering the film on the day of broadcast. The actual airtime would be 7 or 8 in the evening, and the film would come back maybe 6 or 8 in the morning. We would take a look at the results without being able to comment on or fix anything; we just had to deliver it to the station. The tightest example of this would be the *Yamato* TV movie special (*The New Voyager*), where the second roll was being developed as the first roll was being broadcast.





Yamato never went over 10% in ratings, and we were very depressed that perhaps it once again proved that SF doesn't do well on television. And I was especially depressed because this was something I always wanted to work on. But during production we noticed that a lot of high school and college students started to visit the studio and they were very avid viewers of the show and we found that very encouraging, so we started to give out production cels to them like candy. In retrospect, I think we could have been a bit savvy about that.

How did *Yamato* climb out of this situation to become such a classic?

We had to wrap up production and the producer went broke as a result. But he thought that he might be able to recover his costs by selling *Yamato* to the American market, not as a 26-episode TV series, but as a two-hour feature. By then there were a lot of *Yamato* fans all over Japan and they had fan clubs and fanzines, probably the first ones in Japan. The fans got wind that there

was going to be a *Yamato* feature and they demanded to see it. At first, Nishizaki thought that perhaps he could gather some fans and do a small convention to screen it. But he eventually saw there was going to be a lot of demand, so he started negotiations with a couple of theaters in Tokyo. Theaters were booked, and in the first two days 100,000 advance tickets were sold. That's when the rest of society noticed there was something going on with this title called *Yamato*. The movie was going to be released on Saturday, so the fans started camping out in line on Friday night. This was also a first in Japan, and it was so rare it made the evening news. This was the moment when I believe the anime boom in Japan first began. All of us on the production staff were so

excited that we went to investigate these lines, and Nishizaki himself started shaking hands with everyone camping out in line.

Your next *Yamato* production was the 1978 feature film *Farewell to Yamato*. This set many records and became one of the most famous anime films of all time. How it was different from the first *Yamato*?

In the early phase of production we had a lot of time, so we could put in a lot of effort. Toei Animation gave us their full support and we had access to many of their veteran animators, so that gave a lot of strength to the production value. We started almost immediately after the first *Yamato* movie, so we had about a year to make this. The producer was obsessed with meetings, so he would rework the script many,

many times. Each time there was a script revision all of the animation had to go on hold, which was very typical of Nishizaki. With so many revisions we ran out of time, so about 70% of the film was made in the last two months.

Did you have an easier time the second time around?

After the theatrical success of the first *Yamato* movie, the producer became a rich man, so he stopped complaining.

Right after *Farewell to Yamato* premiered in movie theaters, *Yamato 2* appeared on TV only two months later. When did you begin working on *Yamato 2*?

We were still panting for breath after the movie finished, and the next day we began working on *Yamato 2*. Counting backward, you know that the scripts would have to begin a few months earlier, but since I was so busy working on the movie, I had no time to go into the script meetings.

After *Yamato 2*, you moved on to some of your own projects. Why did you decide to leave at the peak of *Yamato's* popularity?

The biggest reason I left after was that *Yamato* was no longer a science fiction story, it was turning into a war story. As an example of that, you see the robot Analyzer (*Star Blazers: I-Q 9*). In the latter productions he turns into just this robot that shows up to make reports, and loses character as a member of the crew. You can tell that Nishizaki wasn't fond of Analyzer.

Leiji Matsumoto and I are the same age, and Producer Nishizaki is five years older than us. For someone of our generation, these five years are significant. Because Matsumoto and I were born post-WWII, we were born with concepts such as democracy ingrained into us. But because of these five years, Nishizaki was born as a boy of a war nation, so the concept of war is pretty much ingrained in him. We became more convinced of that as *Yamato* continued. We sort of suspected that he would start to deviate from the concept of science fiction and go into "war mode" and when this was confirmed, neither of us wanted to have involvement in that kind of story anymore.

Looking back at some of your hands-on work in the battle scenes, you seemed to be very good at destroying things ...

I love destruction! I may have been the one who started the trend of lavish destruction in anime. Those

who followed after me would be Ichiro Itano of *Macross* and Hideaki Anno of *Evangelion*, and these guys have also become directors. I think this is a tradition that should continue on.

What do you believe is the strongest influence *Yamato* had on other anime?

Looking at the design of the *Yamato*, animators complained that it was so complicated, it was hard to animate. They kept complaining to Leiji Matsumoto, asking could he at least remove the third bridge from the bottom of the ship. But you could say *Yamato* was the very first show in which mecha design started to become elaborate and very embellished.

This, of course, set a precedent that forced everyone to work harder from then on. Any regrets about that?

I don't know if this is something I regret, but since the design of *Yamato* was so complicated, we wanted to have lots of stock footage ready. One good example of that was the scene where you see empty space, then you see a point. It starts to enlarge into *Yamato*, it pans across the screen and flies away and reduces back to a point. This scene took over 500 cels and it was done in a month by one animator. We used this footage all over the series. Looking back at this, the coloring was inconsistent and the design sometimes skews and you could tell that it

was hand-made. Today this could be done so easily in a digital environment. Whether that's good or bad I don't know, but you can tell that times are very different.

What was your most valuable lesson from working on *Yamato*?

Yamato was the very first title in which I was involved from the conceptualization all the way to the end. Before that I just worked on whatever came to me. But by being involved in the start-up of a show, I learned a lot about pre-production and how much fun it is to be involved in the whole thing, and that's the way one should work. I also learned that science fiction could indeed be valid in Japanese animation. *Yamato* is the title that convinced me. Those are the best lessons I got from *Yamato*. ●

Interview conducted at Anime Weekend Atlanta 200. Translation services by Takayuki Karahashi. For more information, visit www.starblazers.com

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There's a very unique shot at the very end of *Yamato's* launch sequence at the end of Episode 3. How was this assembled?

In this age of digital production it's so trivial, but you see a very gradual enlargement of the ship in the frame, and to film it required a very elaborate setup. That cost about three thousand dollars in today's money. This really angered the producer, and I was almost fired for it.

How did you come up with all those abstract ideas for the first space warp?

We had a lot of fun working with Leiji Matsumoto on this. We did manage to use most of our concepts, like superimposing three different images over filters, or the image of going through time, that was Matsumoto's idea. And if we had access to digital technology back then it would have been a little more suave, but you can sense the effort that went into that sequence.

In Episode 11, there's a very odd scene where Desslar's skin color changes from pink to blue. Can you explain why this was done?

That's because up until the previous episode all the Gamilas are shown to have pink skin and Producer Nishizaki sometimes asked for the impossible. He suddenly said, "All the Gamilas are blue-skinned." And as animators we have our own pride. We could have just given everyone blue skin, but we wanted to give sort of an expla-

nation, saying it was the effects of lighting that made the Gamilas' skin appear pink but it was actually blue. As another example of Producer Nishizaki asking for the impossible, in mid-production he started to insist that Yuki (*Star Blazers: Nova*) was the only female on the crew, but if you look at Episode 3 you clearly see other female crew members boarding the ship. But we had to obey his insistence.

Was there ever a moment during the production when you realized *Yamato* was going to be something very special?

Looking at the actual TV ratings, *Yamato* didn't do well. It was actually cancelled in mid-season. This was because *Yamato* was going up against very tough competition: *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*. So



ABOVE: Leader Desslar inexplicably crosses over from pink to blue in episode 11 of *Yamato*.

OPPOSITE: The *Yamato* wraps up its maiden voyage in Episode 26. The Earth will survive thanks to Noboru Ishiguro and company!