



## A JAPANESE IMPORT WITH QUALITY

BY C. J. HENDERSON

*One of Japan's most successful  
animated TV series  
is now a phenomenal cult hit  
in the U.S.*

The fan clubs grow continually; literally hundreds of new supporters join every week. When it was taken off the air in Washington D.C., over 800 phone calls of protest were registered during the first working day of its absence. It was back on the next morning. It is the largest money-maker Japan has ever known, the *fourth* feature-length film based on its characters beating *The Empire Strikes Back* at the box offices there this summer.

It is *Star Blazers*. It is the finest animated science fiction adventure ever produced.

### The History

In 1974, Japanese movie-goers were thrilled and excited by an animated film entitled *Space Cruiser Yamato*. The movie featured the exploits of the Starship Yamato, and its crew. It was an instant hit. The film was then broken into twenty-six episodes (with a great deal of additional footage) and run on Japanese television. Another resounding success. Since '74, there have been three more films (two of them released in the theaters, one made for TV), all of them set as episodes for television later. Frequently, the show garners a 40 plus share of the audience. The merchandising of the show, everything from belt buckles to clocks, has made a number of fortunes, rivaling the country's greatest successes.

Despite its success at home however, as well as the excellence of its animation, it was not until 1978 that an American company, the Westchester Corporation, secured the show's syndication rights for release here.

With the current rage for science fiction, it appeared to be a smart move. There was no doubting the show's quality. Early articles hinted that *Star Blazers* would be the hit of the year. Fan clubs sprang up overnight. In weeks, the science fiction underground across the country was talking about "that great new show." But despite all of the attention, *Star Blazers* is not running regularly like *Star Trek*. There are no "Yamato" models in the stores. The main characters from the show have not appeared on the fronts of magazines.

But it is not the fault of the series.

### The Show

In the year 2199, an evil alien race known as the Gamilon cast an envious eye toward Earth. The Gamilons can live in radiation. Thus they attack Earth with radioactive "planet bombs," both to destroy those with a claim on the planet, and to set up a friendly atmosphere. The population of Earth moves underground, and, when hope seems lost, receives a message from the mysterious Queen Starsha of Iscandar. She sends them the plans for building a mighty space cruiser, telling them that she can save Earth if they can reach her. Thus is formed the crew of the *Argo*.

A more traditional space opera crew would be hard to find. Their leader is a crusty old-salter, Captain Avatar. The wounds he took earlier in meeting the Gamilon fleet leading Earth's mustered forces seem to ensure that he will not make it back. His

second-in-command is Derek Wildstar; young, impulsive, and seeking revenge, Wildstar plays best friend to the *Argo's* pilot Mark Venture, and eventually lover to its radar operator, Nova. Completing the main cast are Dr. Sane, head of the ship's medical staff; O'Ryan, chief engineer; IQ-9, an all-purpose robot; and finally, Sandor, science officer.

But, although the show revels in the trappings of familiar space adventure, it possesses none of the limitations. Over the first twenty-six episodes of the show, we watch Wildstar grow from a hostile and brash fly-jockey into a man who can lead the Star Force. We watch his shy romance with Nova grow from infatuation to a deep, heart-tearing love. In twenty-six half-hour episodes, we see characters wage war, grow internally, weep, fight their own anguishes and depressions, suffer from self-doubt, give in to despair, conquer unbeatable odds, and die. Yes, it is an animated show, but it is one which was consciously written for adults. There is dignity and purpose to the movement of the major characters. They move through their lives in a forward motion, ever learning, ever growing. Compared to the stagnation which sets in in most American live-action drama, the turbulence to be found within the lives of the Star Force members is exciting to behold.

This has always been one of the problems with American adventure animation. Time and again, new characters have been thrown at us, or old ones revived, to little or no response. It is hard to impress on media executives of any type that the only fictional characters that anyone will respond to are the ones they care about. Involve us in their lives, make us worry about what happens to them, and your audience is guaranteed. Soap operas have employed this trick for years, and in many ways, *Star Blazers* follows the soap opera pattern.

The characters change. From episode to episode, their attitudes, ways of doing things,

et cetera, change and better (or worsen) themselves, the way real people's do. This is made easy since each block of twenty-six episodes is one adventure. Most every show is complete in itself (there are some two-parters), but they are all only a part of an over-all story.

And, as it worked in Japan, so did it work here. Thousands of people in cities across the country became totally engrossed in the lives of the Star Force, watching the shows five times a week, watching the continuities over again, and still again.

One of the reasons was the translation.

### Americanization

Translating *Space Cruiser Yamato* to *Star Blazers* was not an easy task. Some major decisions had to be made at the very beginning. One of the problems can be seen in the different titles themselves.

In Japan, the storyline treated the spaceship as one of the characters. The Yamato was in reality a great battlewagon of the Japanese fleet during World War II. In Japan, the show recounted the great history of the ship, including its sinking by U.S. fighters.

Griffin-Bacall Advertising, hired to do the rewriting and dubbing, knew things would have to be changed. Emphasis was taken from the ship itself and given to the characters. This was only the first problem they faced, however. The Japanese episodes contained much more violence, one-on-one combat, and blood than American television would permit. Claster Television executive Tom Griffin explained, "There are station guidelines which will not permit reproducible violence. Deaths just can't happen on-screen. The storyline lets you know that some people are dying, that it is war, but we wanted to keep the graphic deaths down and keep more of the fantasy element alive."

This problem grew during the second continuity. Episodes twenty-seven thru fifty-two were much more violent than the first set. Luckily, they found ways around the

scenes without too much compromise. Claster's Ted Page commented; "It got rough. I mean, there were people who were *wasted*, just *blown away* in the Japanese version, and we felt there was no need for that. We found ways to change things. Many of the ships and the tanks and such which were manned, we turned into robot tanks, et cetera. There was just a little too much, like in the last episode. They (the Japanese) had *everybody*, including Wildstar, die at the end. We thought, 'Oh my God, we can't do this.' We didn't want that to happen. We talked to the writers, and they rewrote it so that almost everyone dies, except for Wildstar and a few others. Then we changed it a bit more."

In terms of a finished product, what they came up with was not bad. The show still had all of its excitement, all of its pacing, and the people, not the ship survived at the end. It was a good, solid, *heroic* ending. The fifty-two translated episodes of *Star Blazers* had everything going for them; excellent animation; tight, dramatic storylines; touchingly human characterizations, and plenty of action.

It all added up to an instant hit. Across the country, the math proved out as *Star Blazers* became number one in its time slots everywhere. And yet, relatively few people know about the show. What happened?

### The Stations

Two things happened to *Star Blazers* which have caused this excellent show to be overlooked. The first was another show, *Battle of the Planets*. *BOTP*, when translated, was terribly rewritten, and intercut with far too much soulless American animation. The tagged-on framing device which was used to replace the violent scenes cut out of the stories was dull and uninspired, ruining the flow of the show.

The problem was that *Battle of the Planets* was sold to American television stations the year before *Star Blazers*. Many stations paid

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Graphic violence has always been a trademark of Japanese animation, and *Starblazers* is no exception.

## STAR BLAZERS

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heavily for the show. When it bombed, without looking at *why* it had failed, the majority simply put it down to the show being Japanese, thus creating the first problem for *Star Blazers*.

The second difficulty came when the show was actually sold. Because of the losses most stations had felt (or heard about) with *BOTP*, few were willing to pay for *Star Blazers*. Because of this, *Star Blazers* was sold through what is called a barter deal. Instead of actually paying cash up front for a show, stations agreed to trade commercial time during the show for the right to run the show. The problem with barter deals however, is that since a station does not have the right to sell all of the advertising, the station will not put a barter deal show on at a good time. Thus, *Star Blazers* appeared at 6:00 in the morning and 2:30 in the afternoon across the country, but not once during prime time. Thus, only pre-school children and some college students ever got to see it.

### The Future

Such time slots would have killed any show of lesser stature. Only *Star Blazers'* quality has convinced the Westchester Corp. to go ahead and have the second fifty-two episodes translated. Work on these begins this month. Bob Marcella, the head of Westchester, does not think he is taking a risk. Having recognized the excellence and the potential of his product, he is already working on the station owners. "This time," he says, "no barter deals. If we can open the eyes of the people who got burned with *Battle of the Planets* we can show them that *Star Blazers* is all they could ask for. I'm hoping to con-

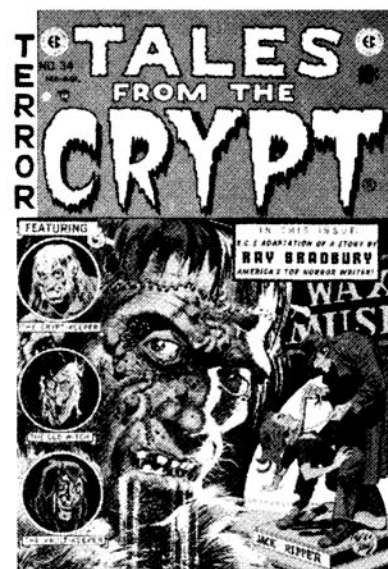
vince some of the stations to run it as a lead in to *Star Trek*—maybe in the evenings, or on Saturday afternoons. All this show needs is to be seen. Once you see three episodes in a row, you're hooked."

Whether or not he will succeed is a matter for pure conjecture. Small but vocal groups of concerned, but misguided, parents and clergy find shows like *Star Blazers* healthy targets. Not realizing that children need to see moral characters making judgments, harsh decisions, they will condemn a good show along with mindless drek such as *Battle of the Planets* or *The Herculoids*, et cetera, without stopping to think of what they are doing. Children have to learn how to cope. Life will present them with many hard choices, dilemmas which will call for tough, realistic solutions. If we deny them material in their formative years which embodies what mature men and women should be, we will end up with a generation of puppets, easily led by suggestions of the easy way out.

There is nothing wrong with teaching a child to follow his dreams. There is nothing wrong with instilling within a person a feeling of respect and love for one's home, and the courage to defend it. That is what *Star Blazers* is about.

In a time of sickeningly sweet and vapid children's programming, a show has emerged which is realistic, humorous, dramatic, and exciting. It is intelligent enough for adults, action-oriented enough for children, and spell-binding enough for both. It is the best animated series available at present. To lose it would be a shame, considering the state of visual science fiction at present, and a tragedy for those who have not yet seen it. Q

## Portfolio



The 30 full-color covers in this portfolio represent some of the finest artwork ever done for E.C. Comics, and they are especially representative of the horror work of Jack Davis. The colorings for these covers were done especially for the series by EC's original color artist, Marie Severin. Packaged in an illustrated envelope, each cover measures a big 10" x 15". The amazingly reasonable price for this 30-cover set is only \$15.00.

order form on page 66.