A visionary ignites Spark Animation 2016

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In 2006, Michael Arias capped a lifelong career in the fields of computer effects and animation with his first feature-length film. Adapted from a Taiyô Matsumoto manga, *Tekkonkinkreet* was instantly recognized as a visionary work and a landmark in anime.

On Saturday (October 22), Spark Animation 2016 scores a major coup when Arias arrives from Japan to present the western Canadian premiere of his second full-length animated feature, an adaptation of the Project Itoh manga *Harmony*.

"It's a very dark story and also very cynical and quite pessimistic. There's no way around that," says a refreshingly frank Arias, talking to the *Georgia Straight* by Skype from his home in the Tokyo suburbs. "I think some

people will be turned off by the bleakness of the story, and other people might be stimulated by it. For me, what drew me to the story of Harmony is that even though it's set 50 years in the future, it feels incredibly contemporary. It's very now."

The rest of us might be drawn either way by what looks to be another ravishing piece of work, even if the American expat considers *Harmony*, which he directed alongside Takashi Nakamura ("One of my heroes in traditional animation"), to be a "compromised" work. "But everything's a compromise," he states with a wry smile, explaining that the scope of the project was ultimately reduced—as many are—by budget and time.

"At the same time, I'm quite proud of it. If not every detail, then at least the core of it," he says. "People aren't pieces on a chessboard. At some point, you have to give the process over to the animators and the artists. And maybe sometimes you get to really steer the process; other times, you have such trust between your collaborators that everything they do is going to be better than you hoped. Other times, it's just a mad dash to the finish line. *Harmony* is kinda somewhere in between, I think."

With a business symposium and career fair amid a massive slate of screenings, Spark attendees should devour the opportunity to tap a source as candid and thoughtful as Arias. The 48-year-old has seen it all, scoring early experience under no less of an effects pioneer than Douglas Trumbull before going on to work with the Coens, the Wachowskis, and Studio Ghibli, all while pioneering state-of-the-art computer-animation techniques along the way. The industry has changed dramatically in that time.

"There was a real Wright brothers sensibility about computer graphics in the early '90s, where people were on a first-name basis with each other," he recalls. "You can't make a movie *without* visual effects and computer graphics now, and that's reflected in the armies of people—armies of very talented people—who commit themselves day in, day out to this work."

But, Arias laments, the astounding ascension of computer graphics and animation cuts both ways.

"I think it's kind of a tough racket these days, whereas when I was growing up, even the pros were working out of their garages," he says. "You know, really just mixing up batches of stuff and cooking it in the oven and seeing what came out. We've moved way beyond that in terms of the scale of technology and manpower needed to create the kind of complex visual effects that are a staple in the movies we watch. It's really become mainstream and scaled up to a point where a guy in a garage can't really make anything meaningful anymore."

Spark Animation 2016 takes place at multiple venues from Thursday to Sunday (October 20 to 23). More information is at www.sparkfx.ca/.

Harmony