

Interview with Mahiro Maeda

We were never sure if this was going to happen, it was one of the on\ off affairs with a very small window of opportunity. So when a call came, and I was told that I would have a 30 minute window (max), had to submit all my questions in advance for approval, and could I make it to a destination as yet unknown (more cloak and dagger than the NOIR plotline)? I said sure, and waited for the final call, microfiche or encrypted carrier pigeon that would tell me the ultimate when and where.

And so it was that during February 2004, I had the opportunity to meet with one of the great anime Directors, from the Production House Gonzo. A man who created the ground breaking Blue Submarine 6 (one of my top 5 all time favourites). He also had a hand in the production of many other highly praised and respected titles such as Evangelion, Animatrix, Macross, Robot Carnival, Gamera, Animatrix (yes, THAT Matrix). It was delight and pleasure to talk to Mahiro Maeda.

PJ- Can you tell us a little about the town you grew up in? And what as a kid you did for entertainment?

MM- I lived in a sea-side town, where I played on the beach a lot, collected sea shells and swam. And of course as a child I sat in front of the TV, glued to the screen watching all the animation shows that were on.

PJ- At what point did you decide that a career in the creative arts was what you wanted to do?

MM- I was about 14-15 years old when I first saw Hayao Miyazaki anime on TV, and I thought wow, it would be a really great job to entertain people like that.

PJ- Had you ever considered another career?

MM- When I was about 10-12 years old I wanted to be a Marine Biologist. I was inspired by watching Jacques Cousteau and his travels in Calypso. I wanted to travel round the world in a boat and study sea creatures.

PJ- Once you knew what you wanted to do, whose work did you try to draw inspiration from to develop your own style?

MM- Hayao Miyazaki was the obvious influence, but also Jean Giraud (aka Moebius) gave me inspiration. And so from their influence I developed my own ideas and style without trying to copy them.

PJ- Do you remember your first paid job, and the first visual you designed as a professional designer?

MM I worked on the original Macross series, that was my first paid job, doing layouts. But my first design job was on Robot Carnival, where I did the robot design work, it was in the segment Directed by Hiroyuki Kitakubo.

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PJ- You went onto work on many animes that became classics, such as Macross, Laputa, Giant Robo, Evangelion. Did you seek these projects out, or did you have good fortune to be in the right place at the right time?

MM- Some of them I heard about and sought the projects. One I remember, I actually went to Hayao Miyazaki and asked him if I could work on the Laputa project. Others such as Macross and Evangelion I just happen to be given them. So it has been a bit of both.

PJ- How did the opportunity to make Blue Submarine 6 come about?

MM- Ah, back then I had just started a new studio with some friends. We were small and mainly made trailers and mini films for Play Station games. But this was good, because we felt that if we could combine the CGI and cel animation it would lead somewhere interesting. And because of this work we were lucky enough to be offered a project called Blue 6, and we thought, yes, we could do this.

PJ- The use of 2D cell and 3D CGI on BS6 was ground breaking as well as breath taking. Was the decision to use such techniques a leap of faith or did you always believe it would work?

MM- There were some animation that had used the technique before, but they had failed. I had been thinking why and how I could make it work. As a technique I knew we could do it. The hardest challenge was trying to convince other people that it could work. In the end the decision itself was taken quite suddenly.

PJ- You were Director on BS6 and it received critical acclaim, yet you haven't taken the Director's position again except for Animatrix, any particular reason?

MM- Actually, it looks years apart between BS6 and Animatrix, but in a production life cycle it isn't much of a gap. But in-between those films I didn't really come across any new projects I really, really, wanted to do. No project is simple, and I spend a lot of time bringing the other project elements together, and this takes time, so it's not that I wasn't working.

PJ- Speaking of Animatrix, did you need much convincing to direct Second Renaissance 1 & 2 for the Matrix anthology? How was the idea presented to you by the Wachowskis brothers, and how much creative freedom were you allowed?

MM- No, I just jumped on it! All I got was the plot and framework for the story, otherwise I could do what I wanted. It was so open that I was worried I would make a mistake. They were quite secretive, as they were making the other two films at the time, and so I was left in the dark. This was both good and bad for a creative person.

PJ- Looking at your history, you seem to have started at the bottom and worked your way up through many artistic positions with a production team. Do you consider this type of apprenticeship an advantage?

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MM- Because I have worked in most of the anime Production positions, I know what each person needs to be doing, and so as a system I know how everything should be working. When I am a Director I know what to say and expect from each person, this is very advantageous when producing anime.

PJ- You have produced designs in many visual mediums (anime, games, music video, film). All of these require great imagination, so do you consider yourself to be a dreamer, someone who is constantly thinking up fantastic ideas? Or do you prefer to visualize other people's ideas after they are presented to you for consideration?

MM- When I am designing for someone else, I work to accommodate their needs and ideas, so I create things that will fit in their world. As a Director I think about what can be done, or what is interesting and these are my ideas. Having said that, I have been a dreamer since I was a small child.

PJ- With reference to your monster designs, just how much fun is it to design a new and original monster?

MM- Ever since I was a child, I would look through books about marine creatures. And I would go along the beach and examine anything I found to see how it looked. And so it is great fun designing monsters.

PJ- What was the last anime you watched that made you go "wow, that is really great!"?

MM- The new film Triplets of Belleville (Rendezvous), with its mixture of techniques. Also I really liked the Animatrix story by Peter Chung, I thought it was really beautiful. And another film I was taken by, is a very old anime called Kanashimi no Belladonna by Mushi, this was just released on DVD, and it's somewhere between super cool and not cool at all, and just a little psychedelic.

PJ- Which productions do you feel most proud to have worked on?

MM- It has to be Blue Submarine 6.

PJ- Were there any production opportunities that you turned down, that you wished you had worked on?

MM- Evangelion: when it came along I was busy on other things, and I thought, ah, the Director is doing what he wants as usual, so I stayed away a bit. Now I regret not having put more of myself into that production.

PJ- What brings you to London in the middle of winter?

MM- It's warm! It warmer than I thought, you have strange weather, it's almost like Japanese weather. I'm here doing a promotion with ADV for the new production.

PJ- What are you currently working on?

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MM- I working on a new TV series based on the Count of Monte Cristo story, you can expect an official press release very soon.

PJ- What is your involvement in the ADV Final Fantasy series?

MM- My official title is Executive Director, but there is a full time Director on that particular series already, so I get to do the promotional tour.

PJ- I see our time is up, thank you Maeda-san.

MM- Thank you.

Although I could have talked for hours they (the powers that be) were adamant that we stuck to the submitted question list and time. As such I couldn't pursue other areas as and when they cropped up. Still, it was fun, and there was even a request from the PR people for us to gather together for a picture in a mock discussion scenario, in which we all pretended to be in some manikin style pose- everyone laughed their socks off for that one I can tell you.

I think what I shall remember most, was that Maeda-san was open – although he was constrained by the PR guys - humble and yet prepared to laugh at the first opportunity. A nice guy and a great Director.

If you have never sampled his work, I strongly suggest you pick up the BS6 SE box set. And after watching it, if you don't go wow, I humbly suggest you may be dead, and advise you to seek immediate medical help.

Did you know that Maeda-san is a big Thunderbirds fan? No, me neither, but it seems that our marionette series has been a big influence on Japanese audiences and anime in general. Gerry, if you are reading this, you done good!

I like to express my gratitude to Hugh David and ADV UK for arranging the interview- thanks guys! And a special thank you to our translator, Motoko Tamamuro, who seemed very well versed in anime herself (she made a play for my signed BS6 SE box set- yea, from my cold dead fingers girl-friend!).

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The man himself



Motoko, Maeda-San and moi