

'X: 1999' a trip into an apocalyptic future

■ The Japanese anime feature film explores the beginning of the end of the physical and spiritual worlds

By Jack Clifford
Oregon Daily Emerald

Not being an aficionado of anime — in fact, having only seen clips here and there of the Japanese animation craft — I didn't fully know what to expect before watching "X: 1999," the newest offering from Manga Entertainment and director Rintaro.

Now that I have seen at least one solid example of the art, all I can say is, "Wow, that was weird." But, weird in a good way.

The 59-year-old Rintaro is considered to be one of the top anime artists in the industry, beginning his professional career in 1958 by working on "White Snake Legend," the first ever Japanese animated feature film. Rintaro — a pseudonym for Shigeyuki Hayashi — also worked with anime legend Osamu Tezuka, directing TV episodes of "Astro Boy" and "Kimba the White Lion."

Rintaro directed his first animated feature film, "Galaxy Express 1999," in 1979, and has since directed six others.

If none of this press kit information — you don't think I just know this stuff off the top of my head, do you? — registers in your memory cells or recognition bank, that's OK. You don't have to be a huge fan of Rintaro's nor an expert in anime to appreciate the lush, dreamy look of "X."

The story is set in 1999, the Year of Destiny, a time that some seers call the beginning of the end of the world. The main character, Kamui Shiro, receives a message from his mother during a dream sequence that a battle between two oppos-



Hinoto, the dreamwatcher, is afraid for the future of humanity, and rightly so — opposing forces struggle for a pure universe. courtesy of Manga Entertainment

ing armies — Dragons of the Earth and Dragons of Heaven — will decide the fate of Earth, more specifically Tokyo.

Kamui, whose name means God's Power (he's called the Promised One at one point in the film), must decide whether to allow civilization to be destroyed, therefore purifying the universe, or to protect civilization. There are seven dragons from each side, with the Earth representatives filling in as the baddies, and the Heaven contingent — directly from the seven stars of the Big Dipper — trying to save Earth.

All of you negative population folks out there will cheer when one character says, "If mankind is eliminated, the Earth will survive." And down-to-earth types might hoot when another says, "Mankind, so vain and self-important. My eyes look way beyond the future of mankind."

Kamui's dilemma is which side to fight for, but similar to all of your basic Evil vs. Good dramas, there are more twists and turns here than any daytime soap opera.

That isn't to imply that "X" is insipid, just that there are a lot of dream sequences and maybe one or two corny cases of "Aha! I fooled you; this is the real me."

Most of that silliness comes from the scenes with Hinoto and Kanoe, two sisters and oracles who can foresee the future. To add even more suspense and head-to-head competition, each one predicts a different outcome. Oy vey, does it ever get confusing.

In addition to the basic premise of survival and caretaking of the Earth, "X" also explores the role that technology might play in the ultimate destruction or salvation of the universe. That's no big surprise, since Rintaro has said in interviews that he likes a good game of "Final Fantasy VII" every once in a while.

Oddly though, this film is Rintaro's first foray into computer animation. His other films have been hand-drawn — which is amazing in today's byte-dominated world — and with nothing else to compare, Rintaro's leap into the modern world is a success.

The true kudos go to Japan's animation studio Clamp, however, which is run by four female animators. The attention to detail, especially to the softer features — in fact, most of the characters in "X" could be described as androgynous — is remarkable.

Fans of the Disney-oriented animation may not appreciate the look of "X." In a recent interview, Rintaro admitted that his generation of animators were heavily influenced by Walt and associates. Yet, he also said he wasn't "so keen about Disney's work and had a different idea."

Therefore, this movie is somewhat similar to a Disney flick — well, that is, if Walt's animators had taken two doses of hallucinogenic instead of just one.

Overall, "X" is rife with symbolism and suggestions of a deeper meaning to our subconsciousness. One character asks the age-old question, "Do dreams really tell us what we may be?"

"X" opens Friday at the Bijou Art Cinema, 492 East 13th Ave. Showtime is 11 p.m. nightly.

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