kidscreen

engaging the global children's entertainment industry

Getting the fix on anime

Exploring the genre's meteoric rise

Feeding the fan frenzy

Convention collectibles are hot

ANIME, EXPORTED

With global interest in the genre continuing to soar, local producers and buyers are taking note.

BY: SADHANA BHARANIDHARAN

While anime is very deeply and distinctly Japanese in origin, its exploding popularity means that, in many ways, it now belongs to the world. But when you take the anime out of Japan, is it still anime? Does it work when it's adapted to stories from other cultures? Or, to start with a simpler query, why are we all so interested?

With reports estimating the genre's market worth in the billions—and global appetites only growing—these questions deserve some exploration.

Uttam Pal Singh, head of kids for Warner Bros. Discovery in South Asia, says the versatility of anime's tropes make it widely accessible across different demographics, cultures and geographies. "We've observed that the popular shōnen [boy] anime, in particular, appeals to a wider Indian audience, including kids," he says, referring to the sub-genre that blends themes of friendship, action, comedy and science fiction.

India's relationship with anime can be traced back to 1993's *Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama*, a feature film adapted from an ancient Indian epic. It was produced and animated by Japan's Nippon Ramayana Film and financed by Tokyo's TEM, the IP's current rights holder. *Ramayana* is an early example of true cross-cultural storytelling—a creative team in India prepared

Rorisang & The Gurlz, from South Africa's Cabblow Studios, uses anime to help tell broader emotional stories

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the script and storyboards, while a team in Japan handled animation and brought the story to life.

This collaborative process helped ensure that all aspects—including the traditions, attire, customs and architecture in the film—depicted Indian culture, while still retaining the defining look of anime.

Anime's place in India was cemented when Cartoon Network's Toonami programming block brought series such as *Dragon Ball Z*, *Cardcaptors* and *Beyblade* to local audiences, building a fan base that was later picked up by Animax, an anime-dedicated linear channel launched by Sony Pictures Entertainment in 2004.

But there's more room for anime to grow in India and develop a homegrown style, says Pal Singh, adding that he's interested in local, anime-based stories for Cartoon Network, POGO and Discovery Kids. "We would love to bring an amalgamation of Indian storytelling in the anime genre to our audience and reconnect with the new generation by presenting timeless stories," he says.

The scenario is similar in South Africa, where the genre has captured the interest of Kabelo Maaka, creative director of Cabblow Studios. "Anime gets to tell playful stories for kids that are brightly colored, fun and wacky. But it also gets to tell serious stories with maybe heavier issues," she says. "It gets to cover the full spectrum. That kind of approach to animation is quite freeing, and it's the way that we approach our projects."

Cabblow has two anime-inspired series in the works—*The Mom & Daughter Clean Up Crew* (26 x 24 minutes) and *Rorisang & The Gurlz* (22-minute episodes, volume pending).

While *Clean Up Crew* targets a girl-skewing audience ages eight and up, it is also designed for family viewing. The series is about a mother-and-daughter duo who have the ability to make people switch bodies—and in the process, learn empathy. "They don't save the day; they save relationships," Maaka says.

Using anime allows for a broad tonal range in the series, from the wacky humor of the premise to the more in-depth emotions of relationship conflicts, she notes, adding that the daughter has a bright red afro, while the mother has purple eyes and hair—visual choices inspired by the strikingly colorful wardrobes and hairstyles often seen in anime. "Somebody will just casually have pink eyes, pink eyebrows and pink hair, and it's fine," Maaka notes. "It's totally normal in the story world of anime."
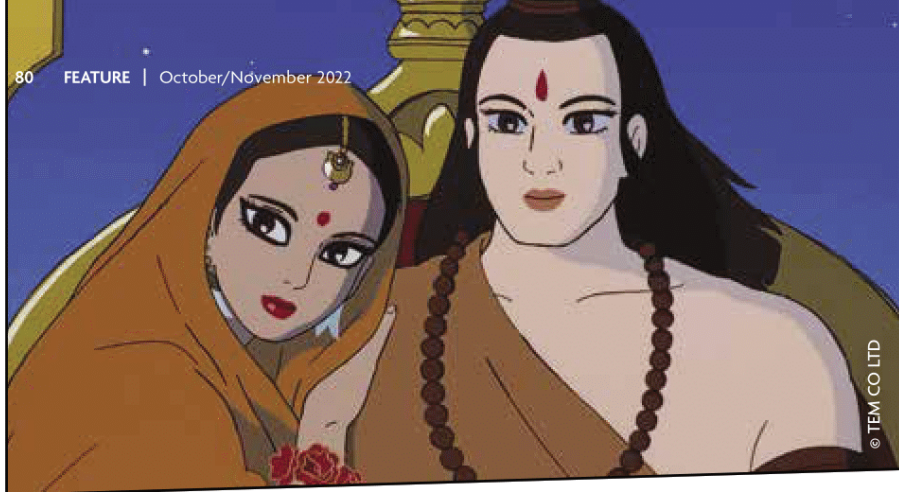
1993's *Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama* sparked an interest in anime across India

Meanwhile, *Rorisang & The Gurlz* is a musical series aimed at tweens and teens, centering on a high school K-pop superfan who starts an Afro-pop band with her best friends. The only problem? The regressive choir mistress at their all-girls school is disdainful of pop music.

Such "slice of life" stories about the daily lives of students are common in anime. Afro-pop music accompanies the visuals, bringing a blend of cultures to the show's storytelling.

Over in Europe, one prodco currently exploring anime is Belgium-based Squarefish, which conceived *Mekka Nikki* (10 x 30 minutes) and set it up as a co-pro with French studio Dada! Animation. "It's really interesting how we can mix the European feeling with the design and techniques from Japan," says Squarefish co-founder Valentin Grégoire.

Aimed at a 12-plus audience, *Mekka Nikki* is a 2D/CG-animated adaptation of a same-name French comic book series by Exaheva and Félix Laurent. The authors were influenced by manga style, and the TV series retains the same look, says Grégoire. Set in a distant galaxy, *Mekka Nikki* tells the story of a rebellious teenager who must defeat a tech-savvy tyrant named Mekka. Her journey to find the cure for a mysterious disease is complicated when she falls in love with a cyborg girl who works for Mekka.

The advancement of animation technology has played a role in drawing more international studios and artists to the challenge of creating content around this style, notes Grégoire. "Traditionally, anime in Japan was made on paper by very efficient artists," he says. "Now, you have software like TVPaint and Toon Boom Harmony that speeds up the process."

That accessibility also extends to audiences. In the past, Indian viewers could only watch anime in Japanese with English subtitles or dubbed in English, but kids channels are actively making an effort these days to add more dubbing in some of India's 100-plus regional languages, notes Pal Singh. In May 2022, for instance, Cartoon Network launched *Dragon Ball Super* in three regional languages: Hindi, Telugu and Tamil.

Similarly, Cabblow's Maaka points to the creative potential of "the African perspective and the African voice" in anime. Animation in general is experiencing a boom on the continent, and she has observed anime's influence on younger animators in a popular local Facebook group dedicated to the craft. "Every now and then, you'll see a high schooler or a recent graduate saying something like, 'I want to make my own African anime.' It's a sentiment that I can appreciate," she says. **K**