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Evangelion, rebuilt

By CHRISTINA KOH

It's finally here, *Evangelion: 1.0 You Are (Not) Alone*, the first of four movies that retell the tale of a troubled boy who pilots an alien machine. But will die-hard *Evangelion* fans appreciate the retooling?

LOVE it or hate it, there's never been an anime quite like *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Known also as *Shin Seiki Evangelion*, the series has been hailed as one of the most influential and thought-provoking anime of all time. Audiences can't seem to get enough of its freakishly messed-up characters fighting to stay alive in a post-apocalyptic world filled with secrets, complex philosophy, and of course, mecha that are more than what they seem.

The 26-episode anime created such a sensation when it was aired in the mid-1990s in Japan that it was even credited with helping to revive a flagging industry back then. Merchandise virtually leapt off the shelves. Little wonder between that and sales of the television series and two movies later, *Evangelion* became a franchise that racked up a staggering US\$1.5bil in gross revenue.

Now 12 years later, *Evangelion* director Hideaki Anno is "rebuilding" his iconic creation into a tetralogy based on the television series. The first of the four movies, *Evangelion: 1.0 You Are (Not) Alone*, brings back seiyuu greats like Megumi Ogata, Megumi Hayashibara, Kotono Mitsuishi and Yuriko Yamaguchi. The 98-minute animated feature is a relative latecomer to Malaysia. The film first opened in Japan in September and it hit Singapore theatres in March.

I have misgivings about all this reinvention business – why not a sequel? – but the creative team assures that 1.0 to 4.0 will portray the series in a new light. Familiar scenes will be spruced up and 3D computer graphics included. More interestingly (or ominously), there will be new characters, and apparently, some storylines will play out differently here.

It is the year 2015 and Earth is recovering from a global calamity that killed half the world's population. The Second Impact, said to be a meteor that struck the earth, also paved the way for the arrival of monstrous beings known as Angels. Unlike their namesake, these hostile Angels devastate cities in their wake. The only thing that can defeat them, it seems, are the mecha called Evangelions, or Eva for short.

Into the mess comes Shinji Ikari, a deeply depressed boy summoned to



A scene from *Evangelion: 1.0 You Are (Not) Alone*, where an Evangelion is the only protection Earth has against those dangerous beings known as 'Angels'.



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Tokyo-3 to meet a father he has not seen in 10 years. It turns out that his father Gendo works for NERV, a secretive government agency under the United Nations responsible for stopping the Angels and building the Eva units.

Far from the family reunion one expects, Gendo orders his son to pilot an Eva unit and battle the Angel attacking the city. The gigantic Eva units, so we learn, can only be piloted by children, and only those of a certain age. Aghast, Shinji refuses.

His father's response is contempt, but what finally changes Shinji's mind is the sight of Rei Ayanami, a female Eva pilot too injured to fight....

I don't know how chief director Anno can possibly pull off packing some 26 plot-driven episodes into movies coherent enough for newcomers. But it sure would be interesting to find out.

Incidentally, there are rumours that the last film will have a completely different ending from the series. An *Evangelion: 2.0* release is planned for this year in Japan.



Shinji Ikari pilots an Eva and desperately needs therapy.

Contentious production

Evangelion was an anime that shattered conventions in its day. It showcased conspiracies, episodes that kept fans guessing, symbolism cleverly taken from Christian, Jewish and Kabbalah faiths, and deeply flawed – but very human – characters. In fact, I would go as far as to say that each and every one of the characters – both main and minor – is as traumatised as poor Shinji.

Loneliness, despair, social anxiety, sexuality issues, self-hatred, the nature of humanity, the meaning of mortality – fans had a field day discussing the characters' psyches in countless websites.

That, and the plot happened to be very, very good.

The original *Evangelion* series had started out as your typical "boy saves world with giant robot" theme that evolved into a psycho-trip of the mind. Sure, it had action, but that pretty much took a back seat to the conflict raging in human hearts. A light-heartedness marked the show in early episodes, but by the end of it, characters (and viewers) were plunged into the recesses of their psyche.

Through it all, the anime had us asking: How should we evolve? What are the Angels? Who is pulling the strings behind NERV? And what really caused the Second Impact?

The Eva designs were very different from the bulky robots seen in numerous mecha shows. Instead, these Evas looked frightfully thin, ran on very limited power and realistically needed to be "maintained". And every once in a while, they didn't work right....

As depressing as it sounds, *Evangelion* is essentially – as director Anno once put it – about not running away. It's an anime about human frailty and taking responsibility for one's weaknesses and reclaiming your individuality. It's a show that means different things to different viewers.

Evangelion is also not without its share of controversy and ridicule.

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The quiet and withdrawn Rei Ayanami.

Shinji, for instance, is a favourite target for *Evangelion*-bashers who cannot stand his whining over his worthlessness and the piloting of his Eva. (But do you blame an emotionally unstable kid for behaving as he does being forced into a machine to tackle something that could kill him?)

Other fans also can't see what the big deal is with Rei Ayanami, who became blazing hot merchandising property along with Asuka Langley Soryu, another Eva pilot.

But what really riled up a whole lot of folks was the fact that Anno chose to end the fiercely watched series with two episodes ... of monologues all taking place in the characters' heads, without a clear conclusion to the plot.

While some found it brilliant, there were others who were so incensed that death threats were issued to Anno. That highly controversial technique allowed us to see Shinji and the others confronting the seat of their fears – something which many fans identified with.

Luckily, the director responded a year later in 1997 with the two films – *Evangelion: Death and Rebirth* (which basically recapped the series with extra footage) and the pivotal *End of Evangelion* that provided the closure demanded by many.

And with characteristic cheek, Anno included footage of the death threats in *End of Evangelion*. It went on to win Japan's 1997 *Animage* Anime Grand Prix prize, and left viewers with even more conundrums to puzzle over. Now, how's that for revenge.

'Evangelion: 1.0 You Are (Not) Alone' premieres at The Picturehouse, Cathay Cineplex Damansara, Kuala Lumpur, on Thursday, July 3.

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