



Slice-of-life shows. High-speed pacing has never really been a feature of them, but *ARIA the ANIMATION*

(all those capital letters are the official spelling, and who am I to argue) takes the artform to a new level, with a show that seems designed for insomniacs. That's not a criticism, though, as *ARIA*

definitely has that 'must watch' factor that so many shows are missing. I wonder if I can get my 3-year-old to watch it...

For full episode summaries and screenshots, check the following pages of this review. Welcome to Neo Venezia, a recreation of old Venice on the watery planet of Aqua (previously known as Mars, until it was terraformed). Like its Earth-bound namesake, Neo Venezia is a tourist mecca, and amongst others the Aria Company is there to meet the needs of those who want to see the sights by gondola. Enter Akari Mizunashi, trainee undine (professional gondolier). One day, while out practising her rowing skills, Akari picks herself up a free-rider - young girl Ai, just arrived from Manhome (that's Earth, to you and me) and wanting to experience what it's like to be in a gondola. Even if she has to blackmail a rookie to get the chance...

The first thing you notice about Neo Venezia is just how close to reality the setting is. I've been to Venice a couple of times, and the attention to detail that's gone into recreating the real thing is impressive - Piazza San Marco? There, and amazingly accurate. Rialto bridge? Check. Offshore islands, in the same themes and Murano, Burano and Venice's other outlying areas? Neo Venezia has equivalents, used to good effect in the story. Seen from the air, the city doesn't have the same layout as real Venice, but that just adds to the authenticity - an island city created during the terraforming of Mars is unlikely to have the same coastlines as its Earthly inspiration, and that just makes it even more believable.

There's even been thought given to the major differences between Earth and Mars, or Manhome and Aqua as we should get used to calling them. Aqua is smaller and further from the sun - it should have lower gravity and a colder temperature. No problem - the setting includes the gnomes and salamanders, specialised professions that work to maintain an artificial gravity field and atmospheric warming that keep the climate close to Manhome's. It's that attention to detail again, leaving no stone unturned.

But enough of the background details. Star of the show Akari is a native of Manhome, and has come to Neo Venezia to become an undine - although since her trainer Alicia is in such high demand you have to wonder if it'll ever actually happen. Also introduced are Alicia herself, and their counterparts at the Himeya and Orange Planet: Akira and Aika, and Alice and Athena (yes, all the female names in the series begin with 'A'). The characters of each pairing are surprisingly similar - Akari and Alicia are airy and absent-minded; Akira and Aika are fiery and determined; while Alice and Athena both have big reputations, and real-life attitudes that don't quite live up to them. The characters are all slightly dysfunctional - their lives may be normal,

but they're not, quite - and that brings a certain amount of humour into most situations that just stops the laid-back feel from completely taking over and adds to the interest.

As for the stories... This is 'day in the life' stuff in every sense of the word - each episode just takes a fairly typical day in the girls' lives, and lets it play out. They work, they play, they usually meet people who may or may not have a story to tell, and then the day and episode end. Rinse, repeat. What stops this from becoming as boring as hell? Ask me later when I've worked it out. There are two episodes which play games with the flow of time, as a way of explaining Aqua's past, but for the most part there's a firm grounding in the reality of the setting, which is really just background to add a sense of wonder to what would otherwise be fairly normal lives.

ARIA is simple, straightforward entertainment. It's designed to allow you to unwind, to watch without getting involved in the minutiae of plot twists and turns - you finish each episode free of the world's cares for a while, and without having been taxed in any way. By its very nature its pacing is slow, and that will limit its appeal for a lot of people - but if you can, at least give it a try. Personally, I love it, and *ARIA* comes highly recommended.

<i>Title</i> ARIA the ANIMATION	<i>Studio</i> NOZOMI
<i>Release Information</i> 30 September 2008 US\$49.99	<i>Our Rating</i> ★★★★☆

1 - That Wonderful Miracle...

Welcome to New Venezia, a recreation of old Venice on the watery planet of Aqua (previously known as Mars, until it was terraformed). Like its Earth-bound namesake, New Venezia is a tourist mecca, and amongst others the Aria Company is there to meet their needs. Enter Akari Mizunashi, trainee undine (professional gondolier). One day, while out practising her rowing skills, Akari picks herself up a free-rider - young girl Ai, just arrived from Manhome (that's Earth, to you and me) and wanting to experience what it's like to be in a gondola. Even if she has to blackmail a rookie to get the chance...



2 - On That Special Day...

Akari wakes up to find Aria's offices flooded - seems New Venezia suffers from Aqua Alta every so often, just like the original. Not a disaster, then - just an inconvenience of life in the city, and an excuse for Akari to take the day off. With waterproof boots on she heads out to see what the city looks like underwater, with President Aria (the company's cat) in tow. While out, though, the President sees an aristocratic cat that catches his eye - the president of Himeya, Aika's company, so Akari stops past to say hello. However a run-in with her trainer, Akira, soon leads Aika to start looking for a new employer...



