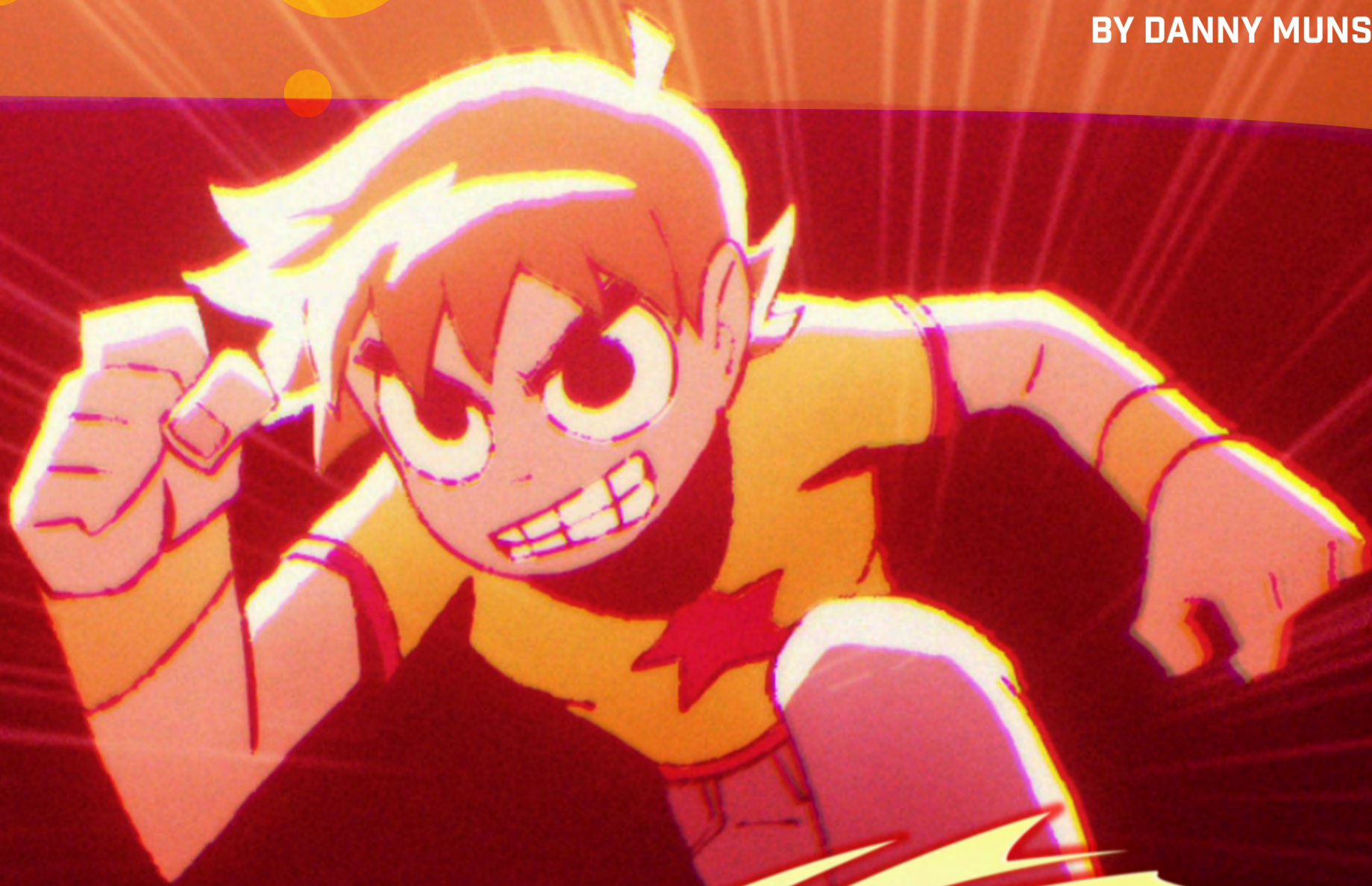


TV STREAMED

BRYAN LEE O'MALLEY AND
BEN DAVID GRABINSKI'S BOLD
STORYTELLING PAYS OFF

BY DANNY MUNSO



SCOTT PILGRIM

TAKES OFF

SPOILER WARNING: THIS ARTICLE CONTAINS MAJOR PLOT POINTS FROM THE SERIES—PROCEED WITH CAUTION



BRYAN LEE O'MALLEY

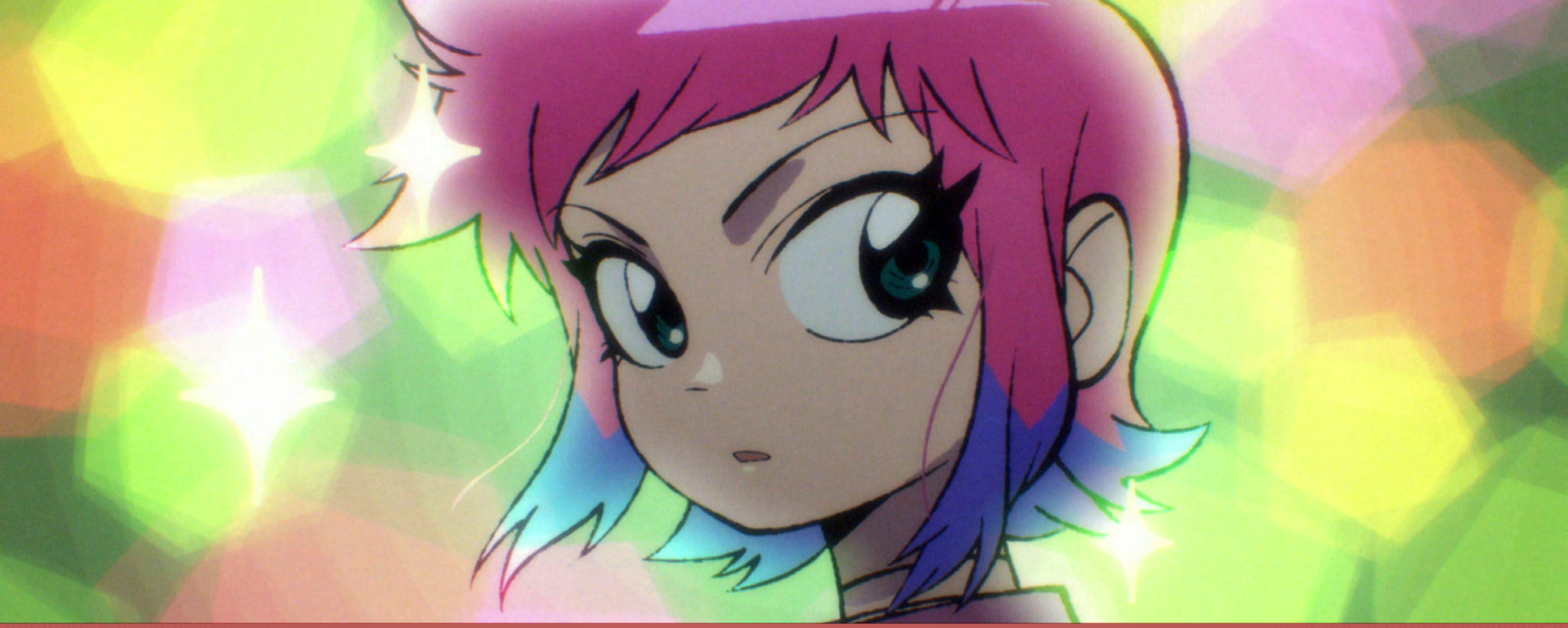
BEN DAVID GRABINSKI



Bryan Lee O'Malley was having trouble with his latest foray into the *Scott Pilgrim* universe. The creator of the wildly popular graphic-novel series that began in 2004 and was transformed into a 2010 film that belatedly became a beloved cult classic was approached by Netflix a few years ago to turn his story into an anime series. One night, over dinner with his friend, writer-director BenDavid Grabinski, O'Malley confessed he wasn't sure he could come up with an idea that justified doing the new series. Grabinski, an avid fan of the *Scott Pilgrim* books long before he and O'Malley met, began tossing out ideas that might pique O'Malley's interest. One in particular stood out. "There was an inherent roadblock for us creatively where neither of us was interested in having this be another version of the same story," Grabinski recalls.

No matter the medium, the *Scott Pilgrim* story begins the same. After starting to date his girlfriend Ramona Flowers, Scott is tasked with defeating her seven evil exes before they can really be together. Grabinski had come up with a provocative idea: What if Scott lost the fight against Ramona's first evil ex, Matthew Patel? "It was a question of if you wanted to do a Scott Pilgrim story now, would you try and redo it like the books, would you try and compete with the movie, would you try and have the vibe of the video game?" O'Malley muses. "For some reason, this concept of losing Scott at the beginning—it just freed us to explore a lot of other stuff. It opened up everything." And they were on the same page from the start, so much so he informed Netflix his friend would be co-writing the series with him. "When we were talking about things that would be great to try and do in the show, you couldn't pull them off if so much of the story is about Scott fighting the exes. We wanted to have more time with the exes and we wanted to try and push Ramona to the forefront. That's hard to do when the narrative is all about Scott fighting the exes. Somehow that led to me thinking, *Well, if Scott loses the first fight, that gives us an opportunity to tell a brand-new story that does all the things we want to do.* It felt exciting and funny and surprising, and the more we explored the idea, it just kept leading to great story options."





The resulting series—*Scott Pilgrim Takes Off*—is beautifully animated, hilarious and a worthy entry into the canon. And as a bonus for the series’ die-hard fans, the stars of the 2010 film all returned to voice their characters for the show. After Scott (voiced by Michael Cera) appears to die at the hands of Matthew (Satya Bhabha), Ramona (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) begins to search for the truth of what happened. After discovering Scott didn’t die but was rather kidnapped by an unknown someone (more on that later), she begins interrogating some of her exes, including movie star Lucas Lee (Chris Evans), vegan bass player Todd Ingram (Brandon Routh) and the big bad of the books and movie, Gideon Graves (Jason Schwartzman), who ends up faced with his own problems after being ousted as the leader of the League of Evil Exes.

Scott Pilgrim Takes Off becomes something of a remix of the original, allowing O’Malley and Grabinski to give Ramona a turn as the series’ lead as well as give a bigger portion of the spotlight to the show’s many beloved side characters: Scott’s roommate Wallace Wells (Kieran Culkin); Scott’s ex Envy Adams (Brie Larson) and his frenemy Julie Powers (Aubrey Plaza). “There’ve been multiple versions now where you settle in and the story is on rails because it’s ex number one, ex number two, ex number three, etc.,” Grabinski says. “The whole time you’re in that, you know exactly where you are. We wanted a story where you could never settle or get too comfortable, where we could always make left turns or right turns, and this let us do that.” What the show doesn’t do is invalidate the versions of the story that came before. The core of this incarnation is still Scott and Ramona’s

love story in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In previous versions, it was Scott fighting for Ramona. In this, she's the one doing the fighting by playing detective and trying to track down what really happened to him. For his part, O'Malley had no concerns of doing a wildly different version of his story. "The books will always be there," he says. "The books were always kind of a cultural critique, and now *Scott Pilgrim* has kind of become part of the culture. What I felt like critiquing was *Scott Pilgrim* itself, but I never wanted to throw it away or discredit it, so we tried to weave around it and not disturb any of the original content."

After crafting a pitch for the series and getting Netflix's immediate approval, the writers would get together in O'Malley's office every day beginning in late 2021 to outline the eight-episode show. "We had our own kind of writers' room of just two people," Grabinski says. "We watched anime, ordered salads, and it was just us trying to make each other laugh. I'd be typing up stuff, Bryan would draw sketches of ideas, and we'd kick the tires on everything. A lot of stuff changed later, but we figured out enough to know the story would work. We remained open that if something wasn't as good as we thought, we were willing to blow it up. I would say the story stayed 60 to 70 percent the same from the outline, but a lot of stuff ended up improving and a lot of details changed as we went to draft." As they began to pen the scripts, they had to remain receptive to the input of their collaborator on the show: Science SARU, the vaunted anime studio that would be directing and animating the episodes.

This would be a new process for both writers, yet from the outset there was a lot of trust that it would all work out. "We didn't really







know how they would interpret our words and comedy in the scripts,” O’Malley says. “There was a lot of blindness going in. I had no idea what it could end up looking like.” In May 2022, the writers began to see concept art spearheaded by series’ director Abel Gongora, an animator from Spain who joined the Tokyo-based SARU as one of its first employees and helmed—among other things—the *Star Wars: Visions* short *T0-B1* in 2021. Science SARU would produce a completed storyboard of an episode about six weeks after O’Malley and Grabinski delivered them a final script. This meant that beyond some minor dialogue changes and other tweaks, the scripts would have to be otherwise final. “Once they started drawing, we had to be pencils down,” O’Malley says. “We’d be polishing furiously the night before turning in a script, just trying to punch up jokes and stuff.” This also meant if there was something they didn’t like in the animation, it was too late to do anything about it. Luckily, that never occurred and the writing and animation worked seamlessly. “The respect for the directors there is off the charts. We had to not be dicks to them and give them too many notes, but they’re geniuses and they knocked it out of the park.”

The collaboration with Science SARU also led to the writers doing much shorter scripts than they are used to. Normally an episode for a

