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CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY | THIS ISSUE IN FOUR SECTIONS
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A Badass to Bank On

By Mike Sula

A little comic-book company parlays a slasher spoof into a big break.



Jason Voorhees has a hand

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A Badass to Bank On

Josh Blaylock, the founder of Devil's Due comics, has known since day one that he'd need a hero who could make the leap to the big screen. Or heroine, as the case may be.



Blaylock (left) and *Hack/Slash* creator Tim Seeley

When Tim Seeley showed up for work late last week at Devil's Due Publishing in Ravenswood, he planned to spend the day drawing elves. Instead he wound up dealing with a mailbox full of congratulatory e-mails and interview requests. *Variety* had just reported that Rogue Pictures, the genre division of Focus Features, had purchased the rights to *Hack/Slash*, the satirical horror comic he thought up two years ago while soaking in his tub.

Seeley and his boss, Josh Blaylock, knew an announcement was coming, but were surprised it came so soon. "All of sudden everybody cared because it was gonna be a movie," says Seeley. "They're like, oh, you're just a lowly comic-book artist. Now you have a movie."

Devil's Due is one of the top ten indie presses in the country, which means it controls about 1 percent of the market. At the time of the announcement, *Hack/Slash* wasn't even one of their more popular titles. The company has made its name publishing series like *G.I. Joe* and *Forgotten Realms*, based on the best-selling Dungeons &

Dragons novels of R.A. Salvatore. But it licenses those titles from Hasbro; *Hack/Slash* is a wholly owned property. If the movie gets made and boosts the popularity of the series, Blaylock hopes it will propel Devil's Due into the top three, alongside indie giants Image and Dark Horse.

Blaylock and Seeley met at the 1996 Chicago Comicon, where both were flogging self-published comics without much success. They stayed in touch over the years, occasionally collaborating, and in 2002 Blaylock hired Seeley to be the house "art monkey" at Devil's

Due, which he founded in 1999. Today ten employees inhabit the company's slick 4,000-square-foot office, on the second floor of a glassy building that could stand in for the Hall of Justice. The tops of their cubicles are guarded by brightly colored action figures: heroes, monsters, robots, and their chosen modes of transportation. The walls are hung with framed original art from the dozens of Devil's Due titles—impossibly rippled men, busty women, and other grimacing creatures glaring out from the flat inked pages. Visitors entering the **continued on page 17**

By Mike Sula | Photographs by Jim Newberry

Our Town

[snip] **“George Bush and Rod Blagojevich have a couple of shared habits we need to shed,”** former alderman turned gubernatorial candidate Edwin Eisendrath told the City Club of Chicago recently. “First, they name their laws. No Child Left Behind. All Kids. . . . Second, they pass costs down to local govern-

ments, unfunded mandates or just changes in the way project costs are shared. Recently the governor deeded back to Vermillion County 92 miles of roads with no funds to maintain them. . . . Of course the biggest example of pushing costs down to local taxpayers is the state’s historic failure to pay for education.” —HH

Actions

Seniors Get 'Er Done

They're a bit slow crossing the street, but boy are they efficient when it comes to collaring public officials.

By **Tori Marlan**

On July 26, 2001, 79-year-old Sid Bild was crossing State at Van Buren with his friend Marjorie Feren when he noticed that the pedestrian signal had started flashing. He remembers warning Feren, who was a few steps behind him, that the light was about to change. Then he felt a nudge and an intense pain in his right arm. He dropped to his knees before he could reach the curb. “My arm looked pretty mangled,” he says. “It was dripping blood and grossly torn.” When he realized he’d been clipped by a vehicle he turned to look for Feren. She was lying motionless on the street about 30 feet south. The driver eventually agreed to settle out of court with both Bild and Feren, but Feren suffered permanent neurological damage. She no longer knows Bild’s name.

Six months after that accident 73-year-old Charles Spears was crossing Randolph at Clark with the light when he was struck by an SUV. He landed hard on his face, battering his nose, breaking his glasses, tearing up the inside of his mouth, and injuring his right knee, ankle, and hip. The driver was never caught.

Bild, Feren, and Spears all happened to belong to Metro Seniors in Action, an advocacy group with 100 members ranging in age from their 50s to their 90s, and after the three were run down the group made pedestrian safety one of its top issues. “We tapped into a national problem,” says executive director Amanda Solon. According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration, a pedestrian gets hurt in a traffic accident every eight minutes. Old folks are the most at risk. According to the insurance industry, in 2004, the last year for which there are statistics, the death rate for pedestrians 70 and up was twice that for younger pedestrians. Metro Seniors tried to find out how



Rhea Byer-Ettinger, Sid Bild, Amanda Solon, and Dan McGary from Metro Seniors in Action

many accidents in Chicago involve pedestrians, but the police statistics were outdated, and they couldn’t find anyone else who kept such numbers.

The group decided to start attacking the problem by figuring out what the city could do to its infrastructure to improve pedestrian safety. They identified five intersections where they felt particularly vulnerable. Two were on the north side (Sheridan and Foster, and Foster and Marine), three on the south side (47th and Lake Park; 79th, Stony Island, and South Chicago; and 87th and Stony Island). At most of these intersections the painted crosswalks had faded, and when the sun hit the stoplights it was hard for motorists to see which light was illuminated. Pedestrians could get across the street before the light changed only if they walked at four feet per second. That meets the standard in the federal *Manual on Traffic Control Devices*, but in 1997 two Canadian researchers studied the walking speed of older people and concluded that it averaged just 3.2 feet per second. The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials assumes an even slower rate of 2.8 feet per second.

Metro Seniors gathered info on how to improve safety, but they had a hard time figuring out which city official to ask to make changes. That’s not surprising, since three city departments—Transportation, Streets and Sanitation, and the Office of Emergency Management and Communications—control different components of intersections: the lights, street signs, pavement markings, signal timing, pedestrian signals. And each department has subdivisions—the Traffic

Management Authority, the Bureau of Electricity—that control pieces of those components.

When Metro Seniors finally found the right people to talk to, they had a hard time persuading them to consider changes. “The city of Chicago is very traffic focused,” says Rhea Byer-Ettinger, the group’s lead organizer. “They said, ‘No, we can’t do that—we have to move traffic.’ But once they saw we were building community participation with seniors and aldermen, they started backing down.”

In November members of the group walked through the five intersections with around 15 city officials. Brian Steele, transportation department spokesman, says the intersection of 79th, Stony Island, and South Chicago—a six-legged monster with easy-to-miss traffic signals under the Skyway and lights within 30 feet of each other that give drivers mixed messages—was already on the city’s radar. In 2003 more traffic accidents occurred there than at any other intersection with traffic signals in Chicago, and the city had just completed a \$2.5 million reconstruction project to make it easier and safer to travel through. But Metro Seniors member Dan McGary says the day he and officials were there they watched two drivers run a red light they apparently still couldn’t see.

A couple months before the walk-through at Sheridan and Foster a CTA bus struck and killed an elderly woman in the intersection. A few years earlier a bus had crushed the skull of a ten-year-old girl as she crossed holding her mother’s hand. “The Sheridan and Foster intersection was the perfect example of how

departments don’t work together at all, and they just go in and randomly make changes with no coordination,” says Metro Seniors’ Amanda Solon. “You saw some new technologies, some old technologies, and no painting on the street. Some of the signs said NO TURN ON RED BETWEEN 7 AND 7. Some of them were just NO TURN ON RED.”

“The issues they were talking about were legitimate,” says Steele. The first changes to be made based on the group’s recommendations were at Sheridan and Foster. The transportation department synchronized the street signs, and when the weather gets warmer it will repaint the pavement markings. OEMC changed the timing of the lights to give pedestrians longer to get across the street and installed a “leading pedestrian interval,” which keeps traffic stopped in four directions for several seconds after the walk signal is illuminated to give pedestrians a head start in beating turning cars. Streets and Sanitation replaced incandescent bulbs with LEDs—which are brighter and easier to see in direct sunlight (and 90 percent more energy efficient)—and installed LED pedestrian signals. Similar changes were made at Foster and Marine, and the city has agreed to improve the south-side intersections as well.

Metro Seniors hopes the city will start assessing all of the city’s intersections. “It should not be the responsibility of not-for-profit groups to rally the community to get the changes that our elected officials and city-appointed employees are supposed to be taking care of,” says McGary. “It is their responsibility.”

Steele says the city is always looking for improvements it could make. “We have public-way inspectors assigned to all 50 wards,” he says. But he points out that they have roughly 3,800 miles of street and 36,000 intersections—2,800 of them with traffic lights—to check. “We certainly do depend on the public to bring our attention to issues we might not be aware of.”

Metro Seniors thinks the city still isn’t taking the issue seriously enough, and its members intend to ask Mayor Daley to hire a traffic engineer for a year to work just on intersection safety—someone who wouldn’t have to go through three departments to design a plan. “This should be at the head of someone’s list,” says Bild, “just as gang crimes and muggings are.” ■

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Devil's Due



continued from page 1

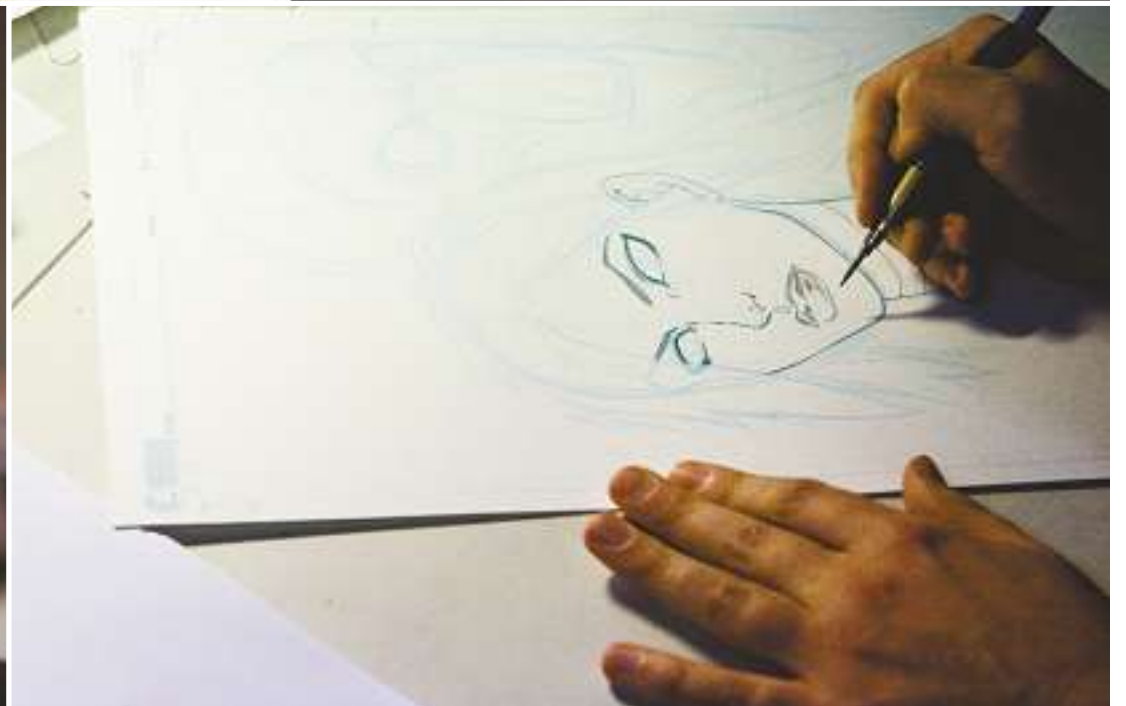
reception area are greeted by a teetering spinner rack stuffed with comics and a life-size bust of Snake Eyes, the mute, black-masked ninja who's one of *G.I. Joe's* most popular characters.

Despite the adolescent atmosphere there's not much chatter coming from the cubicles. "So many comics studios are more like a dorm-room hangout," says Blaylock, a 28-year-old with a green-streaked quiff cut. "It's usually too much of the artist's influence, not enough of the business influence, or vice versa. You'll be talking to other studios and they've got Xboxes and PlayStations. That's cool, but there will never, ever be a video-game console in here. If there is it'll be locked down at certain hours, because it's a place to fucking work."

Growing up in Florida and Ohio, Blaylock already had both an artistic sensibility and an entrepreneurial streak. He drew comics about gun-packing penguins and biked to school with a fanny pack full of Airheads and Now & Laters, selling them to his classmates at a ten-cent markup. As a tyke he told everybody he wanted to draw the cartoons he watched on TV, and at 11 he read a Walt Disney biography, which got him interested in the business behind the animation. "I've always been a sucker for a rags-to-riches story," he says, which has developed into a taste for business magazines and bios about Trump and Schwarzenegger.

Until the early 90s Marvel and DC dominated all but the tiniest corners of the comic-book industry. Once he decided he wanted to create comics and not cartoons, Blaylock took inspiration from indie publishers like Image, a group of seven Marvel artists who broke away and swiped a significant portion of the market share with titles like *Spawn*, *The Savage Dragon*, *Youngblood*, and *WildC.A.T.S.* "At the time I was 14 and here's these guys coming out with their own comics, their own characters, and making toys, movie deals, all that stuff," he says. "They were pretty much achieving the dream of any comic-book creator. That's what I wanted to do and then here were people doing it."

In high school he began collaborating with young artists and writers he met at conventions and got into the frequently deflating habit of pitching story ideas to publishers. At 18 he says he struck a deal with a small press to publish *Minotaur*, a four-issue series about an archaeologist possessed by the spirit of the Greek mythological monster, a character he'd been toying with since eighth grade. But according to Blaylock the publisher (which he won't name) abruptly backed out without much explanation. "That's when I finally said, 'Well, screw this—



In the cubicles

I'm doing this myself."

Though his artwork was subpar, Blaylock says, he managed to secure distribution for *Minotaur* through the major comics catalogs. He sold around 1,500 copies by hauling the series around to conventions—enough to break even—but, more important, he made contacts and taught himself the basics of self-publishing. His father, Larry, who invested a couple thousand dollars in *Minotaur*, encouraged his son's new strategy: "I would tell him you can't just depend on your art talent, because there's a lot of people out there and they might blow you away. I said what you need to do is learn to use other people's abilities. Keep an eye out for other people that are better, try to use them, get them working for you."

Blaylock planned to finance his own books with a straight job, and after graduating from the Cincinnati Academy of Design he was hired as a staff artist for a T-shirt licensing conglomerate, drawing Tweety Bird and the

Tasmanian Devil. Eight months later the company folded and he began working at a smaller Cincinnati firm called Ripple Junction, where he was able to get involved in the business end of licensing, drawing up proposals and making pitches. He tried to persuade his employers to license some of the cartoon and comic characters he and his friends grew up with. "We'd bullshit about Transformers and Voltron and be like, 'Why don't they bring that stuff back? If they did everyone would be all over it,'" he says. But the bosses couldn't believe the 80s were ready to rise again. "When he first started talking about that everybody else was kind of like, 'Oh yeah, I don't know,'" says Ripple Junction president Neil Hoynes. "But he was pretty insistent that we go out and get it, and he was absolutely right."

Blaylock finally got the company to print T-shirts with characters like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Voltron, which ended up in mall stores like Hot

Topic all over the country. "When it comes time for the retro to be popular the older crowd probably doesn't realize it," he says. "I think we're getting real close to five-year-olds busting out their Pikachu T-shirts."

Though he thought it was a cool job, Blaylock says he was still watching the clock, wishing he could make comics. "I was kind of like a vampire," he says. "I would go to a company, suck out all the knowledge that I could out of that place, then I'd get bored, move on to the next one." Deciding he'd absorbed enough at Ripple Junction, he took out a corporate line of credit in 1999 and started Devil's Due. He took on commercial art projects from the likes of Procter & Gamble to fund original comics like *Misplaced*, a four-issue series about a scantily clad blond alien who flees her authoritarian dystopia for an earthly college town. The primary male character is a record-store owner whose psychobilly style resembles Blaylock's own, though he says he

wasn't sporting it at the time.

One of Blaylock's first major moves was to pitch the idea of reviving a G.I. Joe comic to Hasbro, which had first introduced the character as a nearly foot-tall doll in 1964. It had been seven years since Marvel stopped publishing the series. "I loved *G.I. Joe* as a kid in the 80s," he says. "It was one of those things I was a huge nerd for, and I knew every single thing about it." Partly because the franchise had lain dormant for so long and many at Hasbro were unfamiliar with the extensive lineup of characters—nearly 500 heroes and villains—the negotiations took months. In the meantime Blaylock and his girlfriend, Susan Bishop, who now handles marketing for Devil's Due, decided to pull up their roots and move to Chicago. "That was the riskiest time," he says, "taking the gamble of relocating and potentially losing all my previous clients."

In early 2001, after picking up

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Devil's Due



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temp work for a few months, Blaylock got the license from Hasbro. He then made a deal with Image to help publish the series. Most comic-book retailers were unenthusiastic about bringing such dated characters back; it couldn't have helped that Blaylock didn't have much of a track record. "I think someone internally at Image had to convince the publisher it was a good idea," he says, "because I got a lot of the reaction, 'Why would anybody want this 80s stuff?'"

But when fans of *G.I. Joe* saw the ads for the first issue in *Previews*, the major catalog for upcoming comic releases, retailers were flooded with some 70,000 orders, an outstanding number for any title. Blaylock ordered a print run of 100,000 for the first issue, in which battle-hardened veterans such as Snake Eyes, Scarlett, Roadblock, Stalker, and Spirit are called up to deal with a "cabal of some of the world's most dangerous criminals." It hit shelves on September 12, 2001, with a cover that featured the team beneath a giant rippling American flag. Blaylock says advance orders were so high he probably would have sold out even if it weren't for the Al Qaeda attacks.

The immediate success of the series prompted comics publishers to scramble for 80s licenses over the next two years: He-Man, the Transformers, the ThunderCats. Devil's Due followed with *Voltron* and *The Micronauts* and became known as the company that

writers and artists.

Seth Tucker, assistant manager at Chicago Comics, saw the craze flame and die out. "Retailers were looking at this and going, 'We can't sell this much 80s stuff,'" he says. "They hurt each other by doing it all at once. I think the whole *G.I. Joe* freight train would've kept running a lot faster and harder if it wasn't watered down with all this other 80s stuff." Devil's Due discontinued *Micronauts* and *Voltron* after about a year, and though *G.I. Joe* leveled off it continues to sell.

Blaylock knew his company couldn't get stuck in the 80s. "Just like anything else that gets popular, we got a lot of backlash in the comic community for starting this retro thing," he says. "When your favorite obscure band gets popular you complain about it."

Tim Seeley, 28, grew up in Ringle, Wisconsin, the son of an office secretary and a mechanic who collected cheesy horror movies. "There was nothing to do because I lived in the boonies," he says. "All I had was comics and reams of office paper." At an early age his dad exposed him to *The Toxic Avenger* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, fueling his fascination with low culture.

Seeley studied illustration at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, where his teachers were open to his drawing comics to fulfill his major. After graduating he landed a job illustrating children's books in Minnesota. "That was good, because I had to draw stuff I didn't want to draw," he says. "Which is important, because there'll be days where I'm just gonna be drawing rocks and that's gonna be my whole day."

After Blaylock got the *G.I. Joe*



Web store manager Caitlin McKay (top), marketing veep Susan Bishop (bottom)



freelancers Blaylock brought on, and started doing it full-time.

Though Devil's Due had a great deal of creative freedom with *G.I. Joe*—they once blew up the Loop with a hijacked military satellite—they were beholden to licensor guidelines. "It's like if your parents gave you very, very loose rules, and you didn't know what your rules were but you got in trouble when you did something wrong," says Blaylock.

"What happens more often than not is it's 'too booby, too violent,'" says Seeley. He thinks there's something about the relatively solitary lifestyle of a comic-book artist that results in the preponderance of big-breasted female characters: "That happens

Minotaur. Though none of these books took off, the work was liberating for Seeley. "It was cool to do the corporate stuff and the books sold really well, but god-damn, let's just do something where we can do whatever we want," he says. *Kore* featured a strip club staffed by tiny pole-dancing fairies, the Field Museum engulfed in flames, and a scene where the title character punches an adversary's head off, embedding it in a wall.

The previous Halloween Seeley had come down with the flu, and while convalescing on the sofa he'd watched hours of slasher-movie marathons on cable TV. While soaking in the tub he had a brainstorm. "I think it was like some fevered-up thing, and I drank too much orange juice," he says. "I was just like, you know what? The girl from *Friday the 13th*? She should fight Freddy." He says he ran naked from the bathroom and began jotting down ideas.

Those notes turned into *Hack/Slash*, a satire of the slasher genre in which the heroine, Cassie Hack—a composite figure based on the "final girl" who survives every movie—roams the country dispatching psychos and serial killers. In her origin story Cassie is forced to hunt down and kill her mother, a high school lunch lady who, after murdering her daughter's bullies and feeding them to the student body, commits suicide by plunging her head into a pot of boiling gravy, is resurrected, and continues her killing spree. The tarty, wisecracking Cassie is joined by a deformed gentle giant named Vlad as she sets about neutralizing every horror cliché known to Hollywood, including zombie pets, spring-break psychos, and fanged mutant babies.

Seeley, who modeled the goth-pot Cassie on two women he had crushed on, wrote the stories and enlisted Stefano Caselli, an artist in Rome, to handle the artwork.

Blaylock had learned that the notoriously fickle and oversaturated comic audience was slow to warm to new characters, so starting in April 2004 he released individual issues bimonthly, allowing word of mouth to spread. Slowly it did, with fans discussing the title on message boards and reviews appearing in comics magazines. "I know it looks stupid, but it's good. That's the usual review," says Seeley. He says the first issue's sales were poor, and though they'd doubled by the time the second came out, they've grown slowly over three more.

Even before the debut issue of *Hack/Slash* was completed Blaylock was shopping the concept as a movie. Like most of the larger comics studios, he'd hired representation in Hollywood: Alter Ego Entertainment and Prime Universe, whose previous comic-book and video-game film options have been attached to action heroes such as Vin Diesel and the Rock. Devil's Due soon began receiving calls from studios and producers, and at one point there was talk of Cassie Hack appearing in a sequel to *Freddy vs. Jason*, but like most of the proposals they'd heard it didn't come to pass. "The first day we announced it some guy e-mailed me and said, 'Hey, I'm this movie guy and I want to make this movie,'" says Seeley. "I'm like, 'Shit, this is awesome.' And that was the only e-mail I ever got from him. That's what I came to find out—mostly what Hollywood does is talk."

Last Halloween the New Millennium Theatre Company adapted *Hack/Slash* into a stage play, which gave Seeley the chance to see his characters in action for the first time. "I never tried to be the douchebag from the comic book who keeps trying to fuck up the play," he says. "I just hung out and started dating the actresses, which is what you're supposed to do." He's only partly joking; one

"I think if more comic-book artists were starving there'd be more comic books about meat loaf. Fortunately most of them are well fed. They're just undersexed."

to me, and I have people around me. Every once in a while I'm like, 'Whoa! Get the eraser out. I got a little crazy there.' It's this weird lonely job where they start to vent their romantic and sexual frustrations. I think if more comic-book artists were starving there'd be more comic books about meat loaf. Fortunately most of them are well fed. They're just undersexed."

By January 2004 Blaylock decided Devil's Due had grown too big for its relationship with Image, and the company broke away. The way to bring the business to the next level, he felt, was to publish original titles and characters that could be spun off into movies, video games, or toys. In addition to *Misplaced*, Blaylock launched a new universe of superheroes called *Aftermath* and *Kore*, a series based on



sparked the retro trend. Blaylock bought a condo and allowed himself a new toy—a BMW convertible—but sank much of the cash back into the business, hiring six staffers and putting out more books, subsequently throwing work to dozens of freelance

license he invited Seeley to move to Chicago to work as a backup artist, drawing covers and filling in when primary artists were late on deadline, redrawing mistakes, and incorporating licensor edits. Eventually he was drawing more *G.I. Joe* comics than any of the

of the actresses, who played a slasher, is now his girlfriend.

Blaylock says the deal they struck with Rogue Pictures is in the six figures, but won't say much more than that. Todd Lincoln, who's done music videos for the Silver Jews and Aqueduct and is currently attached to a remake of *The Fly*, is set to direct.

Even if the current deal falls through, Seeley and Blaylock still think it's only a matter of time before *Hack/Slash* makes it to the screen. "At first everybody was like, 'Oh, no one wants funny horror, people want Japanese horror, like *The Ring*,'" says Seeley. "And then they want gritty horror, like

Saw. But everybody knows things come back around, especially things that are uniquely American, and I would say slasher-horror comedy really is."

In the meantime Devil's Due continues to grow. Last spring Blaylock got the license for the entire library of Dungeons & Dragons universes from Wizards of the Coast, whose parent company is Hasbro. *Forgotten Realms* and *Dragonlance* have been attracting a crossover audience who know the novels and spend their money in bookstores rather than comic shops. These titles and *G.I. Joe* continue to be the

company's breadwinners, allowing Blaylock to invest in other businesses like Kunoichi, a commercial studio he spun off to handle freelance work. He's also been investing in real estate in Florida and bought into a comics-and-music magazine called *Lo-Fi*, which is distributed in Tower, Barnes & Noble, and Borders. Since then, both Snake Eyes and Zaya Vahn, another Devil's Due character, have made the cover.

In late January Blaylock announced that Devil's Due has made a deal with Fox to publish comics based on the *Family Guy* cartoon series, which has stirred some controversy on fan message

boards. "As soon as we get the haters on there, we know it's a hit," he says. "Whenever it's all positive or mediocre reactions it's never as good of a seller as if there's this passionate community where people are like loving it or hating it."

And Blaylock is still publishing his own pet titles. He's starting to work on a new series called *Mercy Sparx*, about a female demon contracted by heaven to hunt down some runaway angels, and his first foray into business lit, a series called *How to Self-Publish Comics... Not Just Create Them*. That one has won him yet another new audience—a number of middle school

teachers have invited him to speak to their students.

Blaylock says he wouldn't recommend anyone get into comics for money, and swears his evolution into comic-book tycoon hasn't made him rich yet. "You get a hundred-thousand-dollar check in your hands, and you look at it and it's great, you're excited, but at the same time it's not as if you're just a person living in your apartment and you get a hundred thousand dollars. You're like, 'that's a few payrolls.' You just have to stop thinking about the money the same way you used to. It's all about the money flowing in and flowing out." ■

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