A litt le comic-book company parlaya a slasherr spoof into a big break.

A Babyass

By Mike Sula

But not the same solutions.

Every culture has the same problems.
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.

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

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dropped to his knees before he could intense pain in his right arm. He
Flashing. He remembers warning
Marjorie Feren when he noticed that
87th and Stony Island). At most of
sections with around 15 city officials.
mentation spokesman, says the intersec-
tion 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
list,” says Bild, “just as gang crimes
and muggings are.”

Metra 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.”

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 of the people here 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 Guynes and biked to school with a life-size bust of Arnold Schwarzenegger. "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 started their 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,'" says Blaylock. 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 Proctor & Gamble to fund original comic series like Misplaced, a four-issue series about a scantily clad blond alien who fires her authoritarian dystopia for an earthly college town. The primary male character is a record-store owner whose psychologically 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 fan of, and I knew every single thing about it" Partially 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," says Blaylock. "I was taking the gamble of relocating and potentially losing all my previous clients."

In early 2001, after picking up...
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 enthusiastic about bringing such dated characters back, it couldn’t have helped that Blaylock didn’t have much of a track record. “I think if more comic-book artists were starving,” he says, “there’d be more comic books. Fortunately most of them are well fed. They’re just undersexed.”

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“...Because I lived in the boonies,” he says. “There was nothing to do. It was good, because I had to draw according to what your rules were but you got some loose rules, and you didn’t know what your rules were but you got in trouble when you did something wrong,” says Blaylock.

“...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 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 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 whole comic—Blaylock made sure to deal with a “cabal of some of the world’s most dangerous criminals.” It’s set shelves on September 12, 2001, with a cover that featured the team beneath a giant rippling American flag. There was nothing to do, because I lived in the boonies,” he says. “...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.”

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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 stories 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 comic-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 Spars, 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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