COMIC PICS GO POP
Facing a dearth of franchises, industry's eyes look Eastward
By THOMAS J. McLEAN

Comicbooks and graphic novels have been hot stuff at the box office the past few years. But as studies work their way through the superhero pantheon the need for new properties to adapt has put manga — the Japanese-style cousin of American comics — on deck to be the next big thing.

That's good news for Tokyopop, the 10-year-old manga publisher that has developed an extensive slate of original properties as well as a diverse and global fan base. "My dream has always been to bridge Japan and Asia to Hollywood and the West — and Tokyopop being a platform for that bridge," says Stu Levy, the company's founder, CEO and creative chief. "Now that we have this platform, we are able to move into development ... work with creators in Asia as well locally and try to experiment with this sort of storytelling from the ground up."

This year the company founded Tokyopop Pictures and Tokyopop Digital to focus specifically on developing projects in those respective areas.

Tokyopop's prolific output of original properties in genres ranging from fantasy and teen comedy to tent-pole style blockbuster sci-fi could be good news for studios and producers eager to replicate the success of recent comicbook adaptations but who are faced with a finite number of superhero franchises.

"It's addictive," says independent producer Alexandra Milch. "It's almost like a candy store. You start reading one, and before you know it you've read a hundred and you like them all. The key is which one is most adaptable to the type of movie you want to do."

Manga film adaptations, however, remain an undiscovered country — even more mysterious to many Hollywood execs and producers than American comics and graphic novels. That makes manga something Tokyopop has to demystify for many industries.

"Hollywood is still grappling with what is it about graphic novels or sequential art that truly would make a successful film," Levy says. "Is it the fact that everybody's heard of Spider-Man, or is there something inherent about the medium of sequential art and the graphic novel that allows for a film to be adapted in a more efficient or effective manner?"

SMASHING PUMPKINS: "I Love Halloween" reps one of the company's marquee print titles.

PROFILE: STU LEVY
Manga man explores right-to-left brand cortex

Only a few years after starting up Tokyopop with licensed titles from Japan, founder Stu Levy floated the idea to bookstores of publishing manga in the original, right-to-left format.

"And they said, 'You're out of your fricking minds to even think about it,'" says Levy, CEO and creative chief of the Los Angeles-based company.

But when Tokyopop began publishing right-to-left manga in books with uniform size, design, branding and pricing, the idea was mind-blowing. "This was so cool, and it's never been done before," says Levy, who recalls thinking "This is great, maybe it's working!"

And it has worked, as manga has turned into a particularly bright spot for the book industry, with dozens of publishers now following Tokyopop's lead in content, format and price.

Tokyopop's origins can be traced back to 1989 when Levy, a self-described goth kid who preferred Dungeons & Dragons and video games to comicbooks, made his first visit to Japan. "I fell in love with that culture and how multimedia it was, how futuristic it was," he says. "Having one building at the top of the castle, the biggest building in the world at the time, the tallest building in the world, and then the next building, literally right next door, is a tiny little temple."

Immersing himself in Japanese culture, Levy launched an interactive
LEVY
Continued from page B1

compny called Japan Online before
discovering manga and its role at the
heart of Japanese culture. "I was like,
'Oh, wow! This is the origin to every-
th ing,'" he says.

Seeing manga publishing as a way to
build a catalog of content to take to
the digital realm, Levy founded Mixx
in 1997 and soon changed its name to
Tokyopop.

In the early days, Levy says, getting
manga licenses from Japan was easy; it
was getting manga into stores that was
difficult. While some comicbook pub-
lshers had tried manga in specialty
shops, Levy says that market was too
much of a niche to be the company's sole
outlet. "I was always thinking about
the malls," he says.

Waldenbooks was the first to bite.
The market then grew steadily, but it
took the introduction of right-to-left
manga for the category to really take
off.

In bringing manga to America,
Tokyopop has adapted its dominant
role in Japanese pop culture into the
"manga lifestyle." Defined by Levy as
"an appreciation for things that are
from that East-West connection," the
manga lifestyle has evolved from
traditional anime fans to a wide array of
people the company reaches out to
through original manga, animation
and fan-created content.

"You have some people that are real-
ly serious about manga as literature;
other people that are really into the look and style,
the visual element of it; you have peo-
lple that like something that's differ-
ent; and then you have people who are
appreciating the storytelling and the
risk-taking aspects of manga as
an entertainment form," says Levy,
who spearheaded original manga for-
mat comics by Western artists in
2003 and co-created the company's
signature character, Princess A1,
with rocker Courtney Love.

The next step for Levy is by far his
most ambitious: He looks to take his
company into the film and television
realm, with the ultimate aim of turn-
ing Tokyopop into a global brand,
comparable to Marvel or Disney.

For Levy, it's a do-or-die proposi-
tion. "Either we truly make it and
we're a worldwide brand, or we won't
be here," Levy says. "And if we fail,
well, we'll all start looking for jobs."

— Thomas J. McLean

BIZENGAHST
Strange things are afoot in the
haunted town of Bizenghast, where
teenage orphan Dinah and her friend
Vincent must visit the local mau-
soleum each night in order to lift a
curse.

DRAMAGON
Svetlana Chmakova's Eisner
Award-nominated romance-drama
takes place within the world of anime
conventions, where teenage Christie
follows her dreams of becoming a
manga writer.

FRUITS BASKET
This extremely popular serial fol-
lows orphaned student Tohru and her
life with the mysterious Sohma family,
many of whom turn into the animals of
the Chinese zodiac when hugged by
a member of the opposite sex.

I LUV HALLOWEEN
This dark children's fantasy fea-
tures a group of moppets (and their
half-headed dog Mushi) running amok
on Halloween night. Art provided by
DC Comics vet Keith Giffen.

KINGDOM HEARTS
Synergy alert! Adapted from the
Disney/Square Enix vidgame, the
story follows Sora's ongoing search for
his missing friends. On the way, he is
joined by well-known Disney charac-
ters as well as others from Square's
"Final Fantasy" vidgame series.

PRINCESS A1
The titular character is an amnesiac
alien girl who finds herself in present-
day Tokyo. Co-created by Courtney
Love, "Princess A1" draws from the
rock diva's life and Japan's popular
gothic Lolita fashions.

RETURN TO LABYRINTH
Jake T. Forbes' four-parter is an
expansion of Jim Henson's 1986 David
Bowie-starring cult pic. Only in manga
form could Bowie appear even more
androgynous than he did onscreen.

STAR TREK
Penned by various writers, each
tale takes place during the original TV
series, allowing fans to follow the fur-
ther adventures of Kirk, Spock and
the rest of the Enterprise crew.

TRINITY BLOOD
Based on a series of novels by the
late Japanese author Sunao Yoshida,
series is a futuristic epic in which the
Roman Catholic Church spearheads
humanity's war against its vampire-like
enemies.

WARCRAFT:
THE SUNWELL TRILOGY
Co-produced with Blizzard Enter-
tainment, series is adapted from the
sprawling vidgame universe, but uses
original characters and storylines.

— David Lewis
Making industry connections was one recent Tokyopop signing in with the William Morris Agency this past summer. Scott Aguillo, who reps the agency’s comicbook and graphic novel clients, says there’s a lot of interest in the company’s properties. “I’ve been moderately surprised at the appeal,” he says. “I thought it would be a more hardcore selling process.”

We have to educate them on what we do and our mentality, because our approach isn’t necessarily traditional,” Levy says. “We’re not just selling rights. We’re really trying to show that we can make films in the way that we make a manga or make a book, and we can do a top-quality job of that, as opposed to just handing it off to the ‘pos’ and letting them do with our stories what they think is appropriate. And that’s a bit of a battle.”

As it did with publishing manga, Tokyopop is taking its own approach to moviemaking. Part of that creative process is figuring out how to translate the unique feel and style of manga to film — a topic Levy says is discussed and debated constantly. “Are there things that we should always do in a film?” he asks. Almost every single one of our stories, if you look at them, has a fantastical element to it. So for us, I believe, we will always have a twist visually.

The company has so far been cautious about moving too quickly, Milchan says. Paramount among the challenges is the question of adapting manga series that run thousands of pages across dozens of volumes into workable, three-act screenplays. “It’s definitely not always the most obvious or easiest translation to the big screen or television,” Milchan says. “It definitely requires a lot of development.”

Levy says he wants to make that process easier by merging graphic novel with film development and production. “I want to be first guy to do that,” he says. The use of technology to make manga and films with global appeal at the same time may be counterintuitive to Hollywood execs now, but Levy thinks that will change as the film business becomes more international.

The company has already jumped into the animation and digital arena, producing animated series for broadband and mobile networks.

While Tokyopop remains very much involved in the filmmaking process, Levy says no doors are shut. The company plans to pursue multiple production models, from producing its own pice independently to partnering with studios.

Independent projects include the animated feature “I Love Halloween,” now appearing in short episodes on the company’s MySpace page, and a live-action take on “Van Von Hunter.” The company also is working on an anime version of “Princess Ai,” for which a three-minute promo piece will be shown at the New York Anime Festival in December. It also has a trio of projects in various stages of development at studios.

“We can try different things and see what ultimately works best for Tokyopop,” he says.