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**SHI'S MAN - BILLY TUCCI ON HIS NEW DARK HORSE DEAL**
Late 2003

The announcement made earlier this month that Billy Tucci's **Shi** had landed at Dark Horse for a new miniseries, **Shi: Ju-Nen** was only the tip of the iceberg. Newsarama chatted with Tucci about the new, the returning, and the future of his alluring Japanese warrior.

**NRAMA**: For those not following closely, it could seem that **Ju-Nen** is the first Shi that's come along since **The Way of the Warrior**, but there's been quit a lot of Shi since that first miniseries, right?

**Billy Tucci**: Right. Actually, **Shi – Way of the Warrior** came out way back in '94 though '96. Since then we've published lots of mini and maxi series - about 60 or so Shi books in all. The last mini series I illustrated was 2000's **Shi - Year of the Dragon**. That was followed by **Wolverine/Shi, Shi – Akai, Shi - Through the Ashes,** and this year's seven issue **Illustrated Warrior**. We also signed an eight book deal with Avatar which saw **Shi- Poison Paradise, Avengelyne/Shi** and **Shi – Sempo**.

The big hold up is a result of me not following the corporate route of publishing. I love these characters and didn't want her out there to simply give my readers a monthly fix while at he same time, taking their money for a story I didn't thrust my whole being into. They're enough "cookie cutter" books flying around out there and the readers deserve much, much more.

**NRAMA**: That said, and given the sheer number of books you've released, what is, in your view, "canon" when it comes to Shi?

**BT**: Great question and one I've tried to figure out for many years. I'd have to say "passion." Even more so than "honor," the amount of passion I bring to a certain story line and art really measures the core and level of success the books will have.

**NRAMA**: So what pulled you to Dark Horse? What will you be able to do there that you weren't able to do through Crusade?

**BT**: First, off, Crusade will continue to produce and offer specialty Shi - and my other titles - books, prints, posters and merchandise on a monthly basis through *Previews*. Having written/produced and directed *Some Trouble of a SeRRious Nature* last year, and being attached as writer/executive producer on the new *Shi* film project, I've got the film bug, so Crusade will also be gearing towards film production .

But most of my favorite books come from Dark Horse. **The Rocketeer** - along with good old Captain America, is my favorite character of all time; where **300** is my favorite book. The advantages of being a part of the Dark Horse family are obvious. To actually focus 95% of my work day creating will be like a vacation for me, as will not being tied to the computer or telephone doing all the daily business that comes along with publishing. I'm bloody sick of it all and when I'm not spending time with my family - we have a 15-month old son, William Alexander, and working around the house, I want, no "need" to be creating. Crusade is one of the most successful self-publishing houses in

the history of comics and **Shi** alone has been nominated for numerous industry awards and has grossed over $25 million dollars. I think I've proven myself in that arena, and now want a nice, simple and completely enjoyable life.

**NRAMA**: Stepping back for a minute then. **Shi's** not as high profile now as she was in the early '90s, so, for people who may not know - who is Ana Ishikawa/Shi?

**BT**: Ana is a biracial product of two cultures and religions, one American and Catholic, the other, Japanese and Buddhist. Her father is the son of Yoshitora Ishikawa, Japan's greatest living Kabuki actor - hence the white face paint, and a Kyoto Sohei, whose ancestors were the warrior monks of the ancient capital.

For centuries, the Kyoto sect has waged a "shadow war" between the Nara Sohei - Ancient Japan's second capital, and the Yakuza. Ana is basically a reluctant soldier trained and drafted by Yoshitora to regain the honor of the family name after the murder of her father by a Yakuza thug Masahiro Arashi. Ana's quest in the **Way of the Warrior** was to find Arashi and not only destroy the man, but the myth he has built around himself in the 20 years after the murder.

The strange thing is that since Ana is not "pure" the other Kyoto Sohei have no idea of her existence and this leads to the ultimate battle between the two which took place in **Heaven and Earth**.

**NRAMA**: The name, and character Ana takes – "shi" – what does that mean?

**BT**: Ana literally becomes the living embodiment of Shi, the spirit of death in order to haunt Arashi. Back 20 years, Arashi was nothing more than a young hit-man who wanted to boost his reputation. After each "job" he would leave a calling card, a single brass coin engraved with the kanji "Shi" on his victims. Shi means "Death" - among other things such as "4" and "house" - and it is in this guise of Death Incarnate that we see her haunt and hunt her enemies.

**NRAMA**: What's your attraction to the Japanese culture, especially the factions that you're playing with?

**BT**: I must admit that I'm a bit obsessed with history, and I'm absolutely fascinated with Japanese history and culture. It seems to be at the same time, the most artistic, polite and regimental of all societies while at the same time being one of the most violent. The story of the warrior monks is filled with piousness, intrigue, betrayal and debauchery. Many where just samurai, ordained as "priests" too, and I just took it from there and imagined how they could have carried over the centuries since to today.

**NRAMA**: Back to the publishing side of things for a minute – with the control and proprietary nature you rightfully feel towards Shi, why did you license the character to Avatar?

**BT**: Avatar publisher William Christensen and I have been friends since the beginning. He was one of **Shi's** most ardent supporters right from the start and has been very generous to me and my family. Aside from that, I wanted to make a film. Again, this is all part of my plan to totally involve myself in storytelling. I had written the first draft of the Shi screenplay for Franchise Pictures, who had the option before Mimi Gitlin, and truly got the bug.

So, just like wanting to publish a full color comic with no experience at the time, I dove into *Some Trouble of a SeRRious Nature* which seems to have paid off. It won best short film at its debut at

the prestigious Long Island International Film Expo and has since screened all over the country. We've gotten great reviews and the DVD will be out in a few weeks. Again, I couldn't focus on writing/producing and directing a pretty ambitious film and publish comics so I approached William. I wanted Shi out there and not have her disappear like she had done for the year and a half I took off.

**NRAMA**: **Shi** came out, no offense, probably at the worst time possible, at the height of the bad girl craze. I still remember talking to you years ago for the *Wizard Bad Girl Special*, and you were adamant that Shi should not be included in there. Do you think the idea that Shi was a "bad girl" hurt her potential popularity and later returns to comics, as some people could have written her off as “just another bad girl?”

**BT**: Well, you've got to remember that **Shi** has been nominated for three Eisners and has sold over four million comics. There were no such things as "bad girls" before **Shi** came out. The success of **Shi** along with a few other female warrior types and independent comics led to a very nice spike in a depressed industry and actually helped comics gain wider attention. So do I think it would, it really hasn't yet.

And that bloody Wizard Special came out in 1995 more than a year after the books debut.

**NRAMA**: So tease us on the miniseries. First - what does “Ju-Nen” mean, and when is the story set I the larger picture?

**BT**: Ju-Nen translates to "10 Years" The story takes place after the Sohei War in **Heaven and Earth** which has left the Naran sect literally decimated and the Kyoto sect much stronger.

Now, drunk with victory, the Kyoto Sohei, under the protection of the Yakuza will do the unthinkable. They will bring their Imperial Kyoto Theatre Company to heart of Nara and perform the timeless Kabuki *Shi* in an insolent display of brazen debauchery.

Though a fraction of their battle-scarred numbers survives, the Naran will never accept this fate for their beloved city. Led by Tomoe and the mysterious but deadly Lady Kayo, these Sohei , now pledged to the mythical spirit of the Phoenix will trap and engulf the entire Kyoto sect and if need be, burn themselves and all of Nara to the ground in the process.

But this just might be what the Yakuza have in mind.

Once again, Ana Ishikawa in the guise of Death Incarnate, will take up the naginata and don her grandfather's Kabuki face paint in order to save both cities, even if it means turning to her father's murderer Masahiro Arashi to do so.

How's that? Very dramatic, don't you think? I've got to use it for the solicitations!

**NRAMA**: Sounds like the plan. So what other releases do you have coming from Dark Horse?

**BT**: We’re planning on releasing Dark Horse labeled "10

Anniversary Editions" of the original **Way of the Warrior** series, with new covers by me. We'll also be releasing a new Shi and Tomoe action figures and **Shi, Spitfires and Sensuality, The Art of William Tucci** hardbound coffee table book. I'm really excited about all the other cool things David Scroggy and I have been discussing but promise it'll prove to be a really big year for all of us.

**NRAMA**: With the reprint of the original series, will you be retouching them at all, or letting them stand?

**BT**: I'm not sure. I love the original hand painted colors of the first two books.

**NRAMA**: It's always struck me as interesting, speaking of your art book, that you don't necessarily have a "classic" comic book background. So how'd you learn what you know?

**BT**: First off, I know that I don't know too much! Seriously though, yes I have a Bachelors Degree in Illustration from The Fashion Institute of Technology and consider myself an illustrator above everything else I may pretend to be. I cannot express how important a real education is to those wanting to make art a living. Drawing from life, research and constantly challenging oneself to continue to grow as an artist and never, ever be totally satisfied with the final product.

**NRAMA**: In a way, do you think that the market is better suited now to handle something like **Shi** than it was in the early '90s when the stands were full of - for lack of a better phrase, bad girls?

**BT**: Yes, we're established now, and to actually be affiliated with such a prestigious publishing house is just wonderful. I've been receiving lots of emails of support from fans and pros alike who tell me that now I've no reason to slack on deadlines. I should be able to double my output in the least.

**NRAMA**: You mentioned some movie info earlier, and it's no secret that Dark Horse has quite good ties with Hollywood. Are you viewing this partnership as a possible way to get things rolling ahead again?

**BT**: Well, as I stated earlier, Shi has been optioned by Mimi [*Trapped*] Gitlin's Lion Eyes Entertainment. Mimi had been Ridley Scott's producer for 13 years and is now partnered with Cobalt Media Group who financed Costner's brilliant *Open Range*. I did bring Mike Richardson a package of my new properties, *Victoria Cross, Gremlin Effect*, and *The Magnificent 7th Graders* which was created with JC Vaughn and Mark Haynes. We've got some meetings coming up early next year to discuss the possibilities. He's great though and I'd love to work with him and my film projects. I especially think *7th Graders* will be huge and I'm working on the script now and hope to direct it this summer.

**NRAMA**: Back to the comic for a last couple of questions - is **Ju-Nen** the start of a larger arc for Shi - a start of a larger epic?

**BT**: Absolutely, the next story arc will be **The Ring of Fire** where Ana actually attempts to find Nirvana. She'll become this wandering Yojimbo/Don Quixote-type character who finds adventure on her quest to get to Tibet.

**NRAMA**: In that sense, do you have Ana's full arc as a character planned?

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**BT**: The thing about Ana Ishikawa is that she's no Spider-Man, but rather a very reactive character who must break the chains of her past and just be free. Hopefully someday she will.