

## Something in the Way SHI Moves

### Bill Tucci and His Magic Sword

Comics run the gamut of quality from sophisticated fiction to toilet paper. Most mainstream comics fall somewhere in the middle - with pure, unadulterated, juvenile fun as their main attribute - while most independently published books land on one extreme or the other. The bad girl bandwagon, which gets more crowded with each passing week, seems to lean heavily toward the bottom of the scale. Sure, some of the first wave are fun and fairly intelligent, but they aren't the majority.

Then there's William Tucci's *Shi: The Way of the Warrior* from Crusade Comics, an intelligent, passionate story of a woman's search for identity, coupled with the fascinating tale of a shadow war between Yazuka clans. A work of uncommon quality, *Shi* is selling through the roof, breaking the barrier of the upper reaches of the Top 40. It is nearly alone among independents as its sales rub elbows with DC, Marvel and Image.

But how? How did this 28-year-old guy from suburban Long Island end up with the hottest independent comic around?

That, friends, is a long story.

After Billy Tucci graduated from Manhattan's Fashion Institute of Technology, he did something few expected from him: he joined the military. "Everybody was, like, 'What the hell are you doing?'" he recalls. "But I was in training for about six months, and when I came back, none of the friends who had graduated with me had jobs anyway. I didn't miss much."

Then Billy went to work in the fashion industry, just what he'd been schooled for. "I was working at Macy's, designing, drawing little teddy bears and stuff, which was a lot of fun." Given what he's doing today, it's easy to believe Tucci when he says "That's not my kind of thing. Eventually, I started handing in teddy bears riddled with bullet holes, axes in their heads and stuff like that." Meanwhile, painter Mark Zasso, fresh out of college, had gotten Billy interested in pursuing a career in comics.

"I wanted to draw Daredevil really bad, but I couldn't get work any-where," he laughs. "They would say, 'This doesn't look like a Marvel nose,' or 'DC's faces aren't this big,' or 'People aren't this elongated.' I was doing my own style, but then I began to draw just like everybody else."

Then, at the 1993 San Diego ComiCon, something changed. Tucci was waiting in a line to show samples of his work when he noticed "every-body had the same stuff. I said 'The hell with that, I'm going to do my own thing.' I decided to self-publish."

Which was a hell of a lot easier said than done. Right out of the gate, Billy ran into serious trouble: he had been talking to some potential partners about financing *Shi*. They offered to handle all business affairs while Billy handled all creative ones.

Then it turned into a horror story. Despite his backers' promises, Billy was doing all the business. He was working out of their offices, doing them a favor by answering phones because they had no secretary and, he says, they were charging him for the use of the office space. But that wasn't the end. "They wanted to form a comic-book company called Empire Publications, which would be a division of their parent company. We

would each own of Empire Publications, which would own *Shi*. Legally, they would have owned *Shi*. I was like, 'No way, this is absurd.' ”

Eventually, Tucci decided he wanted out. "I had no money," he recalls. "They were threatening the distributors, claiming they had a contract with me, and that they had a lawsuit going against me—which they didn't. The initial orders were already 37,000, but I had no money and the distributors were going to drop it unless I paid for the ad, so I went home and asked my girlfriend and my friends to lend me money.

"There was no way that I was not going to self-publish," he continues. "I knew nothing about printing, nothing about separation, but I did a lot of research. That's a word to the wise for anyone who wants to become a self-publisher."

It's hard to remember now, but *Shi* didn't hit right away. "A lot of people think that *Shi* came out of nowhere, but I was hammering at this for three years, eating Oodles of Noodles and learning all the wonderful things you can do with potatoes. Then letters started trickling in and my reorders started to build. That's really how the book sold. Word of mouth. It's some-thing I love and I hope I never have to work for anyone else ever again.

"Though I don't know if I should give my numbers away, we printed 100,000 on issue #4," he adds, "but I have to have high numbers to survive. I just got a letter from my printer saying paper prices have increased 19 percent. I'm doing a \$2.50 book in color, while most black-and-white independents are \$2.95."

Putting aside the quality of the work for a moment, how does Tucci explain the extraordinary sales accomplishments of *Shi*?

"The timing was great," he admits. "When we, Chaos [publishers of *Lady Death*] and Harris [home of *Vengeance of Vampirella*] came along, I think we added something new. The reason that I did *Shi* as my springboard was that I felt there was a gap for a strong-willed female character. I wanted to do a book that women could identify with."

He likes to think he's succeeded on that score, as a lot of the letters Tucci receives are from that rarest breed of comic-book fan—female readers. Many fans, retailers and even magazines tend to lump *Shi* in with the current "bad girl" trend—which includes what Tucci calls "bandwagon-type books [with] blatant whores running around ... nude covers and crap like that"—but he's been able to maintain that female readership.

"A lot of women who liked my book initially still like it, but I think [the bad girl phenomenon] pushed away some opportunity for more women to even give it a chance. Half the letters I receive from women are pleasantly surprised that she doesn't run around in heels, she really doesn't fight crime, she doesn't have a big chest—she's a beautiful, elegant woman."

Given his disdain for "nude covers and crap like that," however, one has to inquire about the nude scene that appeared at the beginning of the first issue of *Shi*.

"Historically, many of the Sohei monks would meditate in the nude to be one with the Earth," Billy explains. "Clothes were really just a barrier. I don't think the book would have sold any less if I had her in a T-shirt. If I wanted to do a nude interior page that I was hoping would sell the book, I would have shown a lot more, given her a huge chest and pair of pumps. Some of these books have girls running around with just boots on. What I really wanted to do with Ana was give her a sense of humanity. She's not brilliant.

She makes mistakes. She's been thrown into this war she's not quite prepared to handle yet. With her different philosophies pulling at her, she's really torn. She's not rich. She has an apartment in the city. She'll be vulnerable to some things."

The first *Shi* miniseries, *Shi: Senryaku*, is scheduled to ship in July. The three-issue series details—through two-page spreads by a variety of artists (including Jim Lee, Geof Darrow, Dave Sim, Michael Bair and Buzz)—the first 12 of the 36 strategies in the Japanese Art of War. "It's really a pinup book taken to the next level," Tucci admits. "To better know *Shi*, you should know where she's coming from."

*Senryaku* is something else, some-thing equally as important. It's a charity event as well, with most of the proceeds going "to my friend Vito, who's been struck down with MS. ... He's in real bad shape. I want to, in some way, let him know that I care."

Another very commercial, very charitable project is the upcoming *Shi/Cyblade* crossover by Tucci and Marc Silvestri. Called *The Battle for Independents*, some of the proceeds will go toward a grant for a small publisher. Both projects suggest Tucci is aware that his success hinged on overcoming enormous odds—and of course, there's the all-important hand of fate.

"I worked really hard, but I've been very lucky," he points out. "Nobody is more appreciative than me. I go to bed every night and thank God. I'm going to buy a new car. I've never owned a new car."