

ADAPTATIONS: MANGA PROPERTIES

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 studios 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 had 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 as 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.

OUR APPROACH ISN'T NECESSARILY TRADITIONAL. WE'RE NOT JUST SELLING RIGHTS.

STU LEVY,
TOKYOPOP CEO

"It's addictive," says independent producer Alexandra Milchan. "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 industryites.

"Hollywood is still grasping 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?"

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



Amy Graves/WireImage.com

BIG IN JAPAN: Tokyopop founder Stu Levy balances his ledger with a mix of original titles and imports.

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 reorders came flooding in. "We ran out of stock really quick," says Levy, who recalls thinking: "My God, 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 geeky kid who preferred Dungeons & Dragons and videogames 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 be the trendiest club 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

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LEVY

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company 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 everything,'" he says.

Seeing manga publishing as a way to build a catalog of content to take into 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 publishers 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 on its website and MySpace page as well as cell phones.

"You have some people that are really serious about manga as literature; other people that are really into the look and style, the visual element of it; you have people that like something that's different; 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 format comics by Western artists in 2003 and co-created the company's signature character, Princess Ai, with rocker Courtney Love.

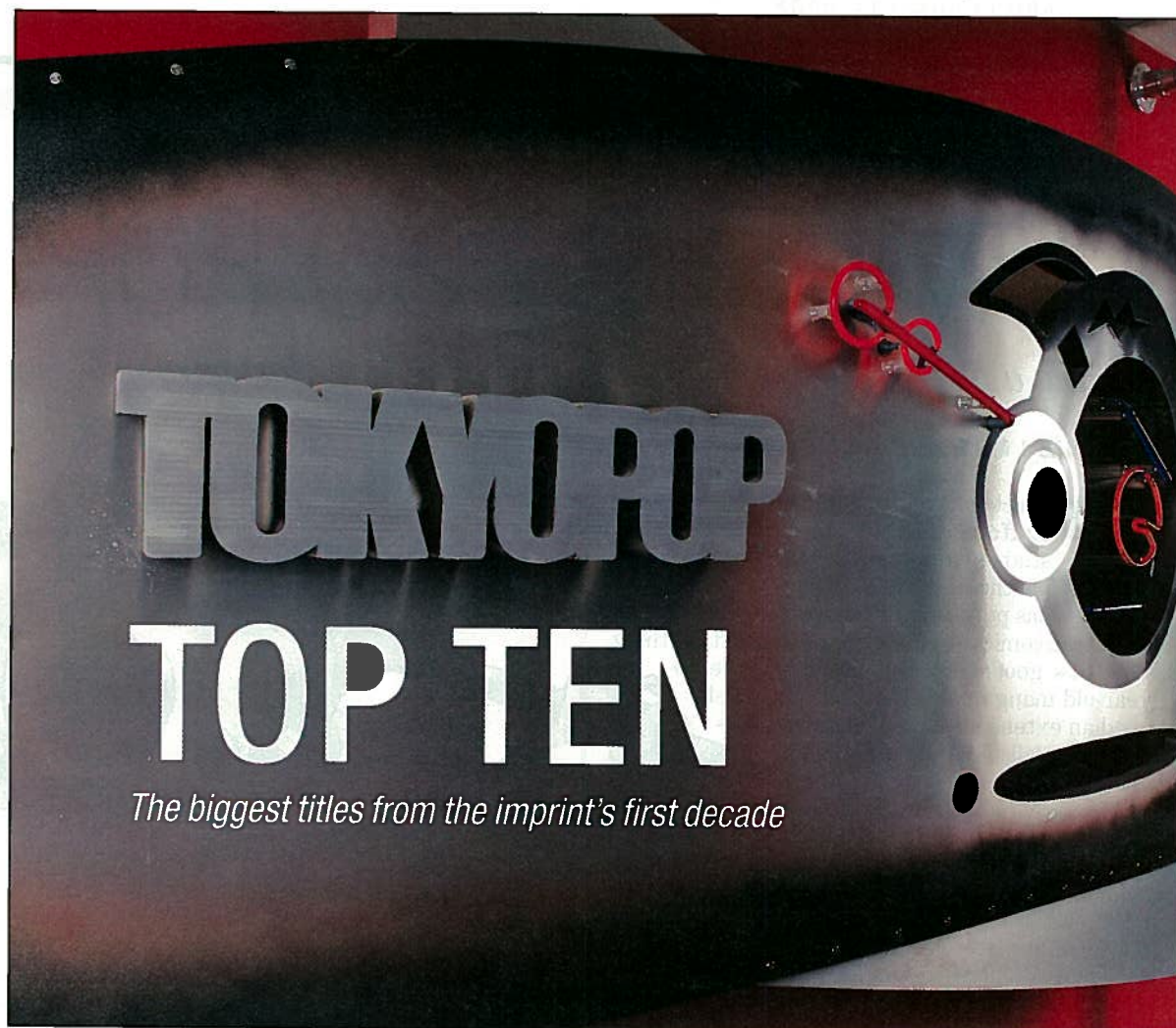
The next step for Levy is by far his most ambitious: He looks to take his company into the film and television realm, with the ultimate aim of turning Tokyopop into a global brand, comparable to Marvel or Disney.

For Levy, it's a do-or-die proposition. "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

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The biggest titles from the imprint's first decade

Amy Graves/WireImage.com



BIZENGHAST

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



DRAMACON

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 follows 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 features a group of moppets (and their half-headed dog Mush) running amok on Halloween night. Art provided by DC Comics vet Keith Giffen.



KINGDOM HEARTS

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



PRINCESS AI

The titular character is an amnesiac alien girl who finds herself in present-day Tokyo. Co-created by Courtney Love, "Princess Ai" 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 further 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 Entertainment, series is adapted from the sprawling videogame universe, but uses original characters and storylines.

— David Lewis

POP

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Making industry connections was one reason Tokyopop signed on with the William Morris Agency this past summer. Scott Agostini, 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 film 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 'pros' and letting them do with our stories what they think is appropriate. And that's a bit of a battle."

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SCOTT AGOSTINI,
WMA AGENT

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 bigscreen 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 the 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 pics independently to partnering with studios.

Independent projects include the animated feature "I Luv 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.



WARRIOR PRINCESS: An anime adaptation of "Princess Ai" is in the works.

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