

THE SUN

VERSATILE ARTISTS A BIG DRAW AT COMIC-CON

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Sep 8, 2007

Much like his characters, comic-book artist Jimmy Palmiotti wears many masks and has a few hidden talents.

A guest at this weekend's Baltimore Comic-Con, Palmiotti began as a comic-book inker, a job in which he traced artists' pencil drawings in ink. He went on to draw a number of heroes for DC Comics, co-write stories for several video games and help write and direct the Painkiller Jane TV series for the Sci Fi Channel.

In today's pop-culture world, artists rarely just compile comic books. Instead, they help develop brands that span multiple forms of entertainment. A number of the guests at the comic-book convention have their hands in movies, magazines and other forms of media, said organizer Marc Nathan.

"One guy might be an artist from Justice League, but as a side job he's drawing the cover to TV Guide, or as a side job he's doing a movie poster, or as a side job he's doing a story board for Stephen Spielberg," Nathan said. "It is dumbfounding."

As a result, the crowd at the convention is composed of not just comic-book fans, but also cartoon, TV and video-game lovers, Palmiotti said.

"When I'm sitting there, I'm signing comics, I'm signing video-game boxes, I'm signing pirated DVDs -- whatever they throw at me," Palmiotti said.

Other guests at the convention, which takes place at the Baltimore Convention Center, include Hellboy creator Mike Mignola, MAD magazine cartoonist Sergio Aragones, Marvel Comics artist Dick Ayers and X-Men illustrator Jim Lee.

Aside from about 140 vendors and several hundred guests, the convention will also feature Donkey Kong arcade battles. More than 10,000 people attended last year's convention, and Nathan expects more this year.

At conventions like Baltimore Comic-Con, comic-book fans can get up-close and personal with their idols, unlike the scene at baseball-card shows, where baseball fans rarely meet stars, Nathan said.

"[The convention is] like going to the All-Star game," he said.

Aside from the big names, there will also be a slew of other guest artists who are helping push the comic-book art form into new mediums.

John Gallagher, a 39-year-old who lives in Falls Church, Va., has published a comic called Buzzboy, which is about the "world's coolest super sidekick," for the past 10 years.

"Comics are how I learned how to read," Gallagher said.

Recently, he started working with a marketing company called Starbridge Media Group. In his new job, Gallagher produces a bimonthly comic book called Nascar Heroes, based on the sport. He hopes to turn it into an animated TV series in the vein of one he already produces called the Eagles Kids Club.

Each medium has its strengths and weaknesses. Working in several mediums can help focus an artist, Gallagher said.

"It's using different muscles

when you do these things," Gallagher said. "But it's all about the story and using each medium to its best."

Though Palmiotti and Gallagher work in multiple mediums, they agree the essence of their trade is the same: crafting an interesting story.

"It's sort of like an artist using different tools," he said. "Video games, comics, TV -- it all comes back to basic storytelling; being able to entertain, whether for a viewer or reader."

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