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El Maestro de Cartoonists

Sergio Aragonés highlights WonderCon2004

By Kat Avila | Web Published 5.13.2004

It's been 50 years since Godzilla stepped onto Japanese shores and 50 years since world-renowned MAD cartoonist Sergio Aragonés made his first sales to Mexican humor magazines.

At WonderCon 2004 in San Francisco, special guest Sergio Aragonés sold and signed copies of his GROO THE WANDERER comic books. The character of Groo, a simple barbarian, has been carving a path of destruction and laughter since 1982.

GROO THE WANDERER is "one of the longest-running 'creator-owned' comic book properties," writes GROO scripter Mark Evanier in the WonderCon program book. At the "The Sergio and Mark Show" panel, Sergio and Mark shared anecdotes about their longtime collaboration and friendship. Other dream team members of GROO, who have been there from the beginning, are letterer Stan Sakai of USAGI YOJIMBO comic fame and colorist Tom Luth.

"I've had these comics since I was seven years old," says a 20-something man ahead of me at Sergio's booth. He hands over the first and second issues of GROO THE WANDERER for Sergio to sign.

I buy Sergio's DIA DE LOS MUERTOS comic, published by Dark Horse Comics in 1998. The comic is about the Day of the Dead and the flood of obnoxious American tourists that overwhelms a Mexican town for the holiday spectacle. Sergio doodles a sugar skull and signs his name in my copy. We chat a bit. Then he pulls out a photograph of a folk craft of Christ on the cross. The artisan, Sergio reveals, is himself. I want to talk to him more about it, as well as his education in architecture and his performance experience in pantomime and clowning. But there are other fans waiting their turn.

Like many fans, I first became acquainted with Sergio's work through MAD MAGAZINE. Years later, I used his wordless cartoons comprising JAG's COMICS AND CONVERSATION series in my ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom.

I watch Sergio in action at the "Quick Draw!" panel, an improvisational drawing session, moderated by Mark Evanier. The other cartoonists are Kyle Baker (PLASTIC MAN for DC Comics), Scott Shaw (Simpsons comics), and Steve Leialoha (Spider-Man comics).

In one task featuring Sergio, he is asked to draw a coherent composition from a story given to him in short fragments: "A cat...fleeing from a dinosaur...while the Bedouins attack...the flood waters are rising...and the ninjas are invading..." Sergio's black marker flies across the sketch pad and magically integrates each fragment.

Other challenges the cartoonists are asked to draw include their worst art jobs, weapons of mass destruction found at WonderCon, and new jobs for the Hulk. It's all highly entertaining and makes you appreciate the skill of the cartoonists even more.

Besides panels, a comic/pop culture fan – in costume or out of



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costume – can find a number of related vendors in WonderCon's Exhibit Hall. I spoke with Shawn Sanders, editor-in-chief at ComicsOne, which bills itself as "Your #1 source for kung fu comics." Kung fu comics, Shawn said, are frequently adapted from kung fu novels and movies. The Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon comic they sell is from the novel. The artwork in these comics is incredible and in full-color. Of course, I couldn't walk away without purchasing a STORY OF THE TAO comic with Andy Seto's luscious and dynamic art. I also picked up a couple of their Korean comic titles. One of them was MY SASSY GIRL adapted from the Korean hit movie of the same name.

On the last day of the convention, Comics Salon was scheduled all day in one of the rooms across from the anime (Japanese animation) viewing rooms. Comics Salon began in 2001 when Rory Root, owner of Comic Relief, a famous Berkeley comics bookstore, asked Erik Nebel to organize a cartoonist get-together. Erik told me they meet about two to three times a year at a restaurant to do jams. "I'd say about 200 people have come to the salon over the past few years. But there is a group of about 30 of my cartoonist friends who are there most consistently." On my way out of Comics Salon, a member of Student Art Publishing at UC Berkeley gave me several issues of their BEZERK comics magazine.

WonderCon 2004 was a good place to glimpse some of the work of Bay Area independent cartoonists and filmmakers. Additionally, it was for me a warm-up for this July's humongous Comic-Con International in San Diego. If you are interested in comics at all, Comic-Con is the convention you don't want to miss as it is the largest convention for comics and pop culture in the United States. Hope to see you there!

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