Superheroes: Anything but a Deadpool of ideas for filmmakers

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Images of two-fisted warriors and vivid action explode out of a home office in a Vancouver suburb, from the pen and brush of one of the most in-demand artists in the superhero world.

Kaare Andrews has illustrated five comic-book covers for Marvel’s Deadpool series, three of which were recently named by a fan site among the best ever.

Sunday’s cover for The Province print edition

He writes and draws other characters, including Spider-Man, Gambit and the lesser-known Iron Fist, and he recently created and owns a new character coming out in a comic later this year.

But like most who work in the industry, the 40-year-old Andrews is first a comic-book fanboy, as excited as anyone about the new B.C.-filmed Deadpool movie.

“What people love about Deadpool is that he’s basically the Looney Tunes, dark-side version of Spider-Man,” said Andrews, who has illustrated the comic-book Deadpool but wasn’t involved in the new movie.
“He’s very satirical, very naughty and adult with his humour.”

The character, with a mask over his disfigured face and the healing powers of X-Man Wolverine, first showed up in the comics as a straight-up villain in 1991, but as his popularity grew, he gradually took centre stage in his own stories.

“He really started to gain popularity when he started breaking the fourth wall in comic books, talking to the reader,” Andrews said.

The new movie carries on that character trait, making it a perfect fit for fast-talking star Ryan Reynolds. Promos leading up to the movie’s release have featured Reynolds’ Deadpool addressing TV and movie audiences in trailers for the movie, as well as in faux public-service announcements and a Christmas message (“Hold on to your ornaments”).

Andrews himself travels to comic fan conventions and said he has seen the character’s appeal grow.

“People ask me for more and more Deadpool sketches, and I sign more of my Deadpool covers,” he said. “I felt it growing even before the movie was announced. It took a long time for the movie to happen; it was supposed to happen years ago.”

Reynolds played a version of the character for a supporting role in 2009’s X-Men Origins: Wolverine, also filmed partly in Vancouver, but fans were disappointed when the movie’s writers rendered Deadpool as a mute villain.

Reynolds has expressed his disappointment with that rendering of the character as well, and for the new Deadpool movie he took on a producer’s role, he said, as a means of having a say in keeping the character true to the comics.

“When he first blew up and became a star, he kept bringing it up and pushing the studios,” Andrews said. “He’s really been the driving force behind getting the movie made.”
Ryan Reynolds was key to getting Deadpool made and keeping it true to the original comics. (Joe Lederer, Marvel/Twentieth Century Fox)

The two-month Deadpool shoot last spring was the talk of a busy film and TV production schedule in and around Vancouver, partly because of Reynolds’s hometown-boy-made-good appeal, and partly because of the production’s high profile.

The producers got permission to close the Georgia Viaduct for filming of an extended vehicle-mayhem action sequence, and Reynolds himself stoked the online interest with smart-ass tweets and photos.

Deadpool comes to theatres at a time when Marvel characters rule the comic shops and the big screen. Spider-Man and the X-Men keep being reinvented with new actors, and Iron Man was a surprise hit, in stand-alone movies and in the Avengers series with Captain America, the Hulk and others.

Even the offbeat Guardians of the Galaxy, with one of its heroes a talking raccoon voiced by star Bradley Cooper, turned into box office gold.

It was a different world when Andrews broke in 16 years ago as a comic-book artist.

“Marvel was undergoing bankruptcy protection, the industry was collapsing and no one was hiring anyone,” he said. “Every editor I’d meet would be like, ‘There are not even going to be comic books anywhere in five years. You should get a different job.’”

Comics from Marvel and rival DC had originally hit the small screen aimed at kids — the 1960s Saturday morning animated Spider-Man, and DC’s campy live-action TV series Batman.

But Andrews came to the characters through the printed page.

“I’d been reading comics since before I had memories, before I could read words,” he said. “I remember buying them and being entranced by the art and the storytelling, the panel-to-panel storytelling. And now they rule the world again.”

DC was first to crack the feature movie market, with Christopher Reeve starring in 1978’s Superman. Director Tim Burton’s 1989 hit Batman took a darker turn, but when those bloated movies ran aground in the 1990s, Hollywood thought comic-book movies were done.

The first X-Men movie, produced in 2000 by studio 20th Century Fox, was a shot in the arm for Marvel’s popularity. Then came the first Spider-Man in 2002, made by Sony. Eventually Marvel formed its own movie division and made Iron Man, a surprise hit about a lesser-known comic character.

The Marvel movie juggernaut has since been bought by Disney.
B.C.’s Kaare Andrews broke in as a comic-book artist long before the current vogue for superhero movies, but Deadpool has always been a favourite. (Jason Payne, PNG)

All of that was yet to come when Andrews sent in his first drawings. “I am kind of a contrarian. The only people doing comic books at that time were people who loved the medium.”

Andrews joined that wave in 1999 by sending his drawings to editors in New York. “It’s easier to break in as an artist, because editors can tell in a second whether they like the art or not,” he said. “It’s harder to break in as a writer, because someone has to take the time to read your work.”

He broke in with drawings for Gambit and then Spider-Man — his favourite character. Within a year he was writing Spider-Man stories out of his home in B.C. “You can do this job anywhere in the world.”

Andrews also directs and writes movies and TV, and on a typical day he rises at 5 a.m. to write or draw. These days he’s working on a new comic story for another publisher, called Renato Jones, the One Per Cent, which, unlike his work for Marvel, he will own himself. The character is a vigilante who takes the super-rich to task for their misdeeds.

By 7 a.m. most days, he’s fielding emails from New York editors looking for new art or stories. He can’t talk about much of the new work he does for Marvel — non-disclosure agreements are de rigueur in the comic world these days.

“There’s such a rabid Internet fan base for comics — for any kind of news, information, it’s crazy,” he said.

By late afternoon, Andrews puts pen, paper and laptop aside and rejoins his wife and two preschool children. They’re expecting a third child soon.
Deadpool starring B.C. actor Ryan Reynolds is just the latest in a seemingly endless string of superhero movies, many of which have been filmed in B.C. (Joe Lederer, Marvel/Twentieth Century Fox)

Andrews said he doesn’t expect the comic-book movie wave to break anytime soon, and adds that Deadpool should continue the streak.

“The cool thing about the Deadpool movie is that it looks like they got a lot of it right,” he said. “They’re taking a lot of chances and pushing the superhero genre in a new way, that I haven’t seen before.”

Coming up soon for Marvel is an Iron Fist TV series for Netflix, and a movie version of Dr. Strange starring Benedict Cumberbatch.

“Of course, everything is cyclical, but I disagree that it will pass,” Andrews said.

“Once you start digging, you will be surprised how deep these characters go. Everything from spies to westerns to medieval times, comedies, it’s a new mythology.”

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Spider-Man starring Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst came out shortly after 9/11, capturing the imagination of a nervous populace.