

Franchesco!: Putting the She in Dragon

On July 26 the highly anticipated **She-Dragon #1** by Erik Larsen and hot artist **Franchesco!** hit comic shops. I recently talked with Franchesco! about his art on *She-Dragon*, his colorful career in comics, what it's like to work with Erik Larsen and a little something called Skippy the Paper Clip.

Markisan Naso: First off, how did you come to work on the *She-Dragon Special*?

Franchesco!: I brown bagged it, took the "el" first thing in the morning (that's short for Elevated Tracks for the trains that run downtown Chicago). Nah... that's not true – but a train *was* involved. A train got me from my parked car to the departure gate at the United terminal at O'Hare International Airport. From there I went to Los Angeles for a Wizard World convention. I took a rare break from my sketch list and played hooky by hitting the Wizard Party after-hours. Comic book pros, booze, and sexy booth babes... I mean c'mon, what's not to like?

But that's really got nothing to do with *She-Dragon*...

MN: Okay then...

F!: (laughs) It's what happened at the Wizard Party that led me to cross paths with Erik Larsen the next day. Well, the party had nothing to do with it really, but I had fun just the same! The morning after the Wizard Party I got to the show floor really early and saw Erik penciling some *Savage Dragon* pages in the lobby. I was happy to see him there and went over to say hi. I love setting up in Artist Alley at conventions and once I sit down in the morning I never get up until the show closes. I never get to see 99 percent of what goes on during the show. So even though folks are all in that same room, I rarely get to cross paths with most of them.

If not for the night before I would've still been at the hotel getting ready for the show, or grabbing breakfast, or something or other. I probably would not have had the chance to say "hello" to one of my favorite creators. It was still too early to set up. The doors were locked and the place was still pretty much deserted. Erik invited me to sit at his table and that gave me a chance to get caught up on my sketch list for the comic-con as we waited for the show to open. We did not talk about *She-Dragon* at that time... but it all stems from that morning sketch-a-thon. Yeah, you guessed it... I was in total fanboy mode.

MN: So, I take it you were familiar with Erik Larsen's work before you got the gig?

F!: The short answer is "Yes."

Yes, I was. I was familiar with Erik Larsen's *Savage Dragon* work years and years before an IMAGE comic was ever published. I have been a fan of the *Savage Dragon* since the days of Megaton Comics. Coincidentally enough, *She-Dragon* first appeared in the pages of the *Savage Dragon/Megaton Man* one-shot, not to be confused with Megaton (star of *Megaton Comics*). Whew! There will be a test on this later, so I hope you're all taking notes. (laughs)

MN: So when *did* you and Erik actually start talking about doing something with *She-Dragon*?

F!: Hey, what's with the hard questions? I was told this was going to be an easy question & answer thingamajig. Somebody get me my manager on the phone and this coffee is not hot enough. Brew me a fresh pot and get it right this time. And peel me a grape... hey, is this mike still on?



[tap-tap] Oh crap. We can edit all that stuff out, right?

MN: Of course, Franchesco!... [keeps tape rolling]

F!: (laughs) I really don't know the exact answer to that, far as a point on the calendar. I generally have a bunch of irons in the fire and juggle between this thing and that, accommodating whatever deadline is screaming for the most attention at any given time. If memory serves, I recall getting a shout-out from Erik around the time Glum tossed poor widdle She-Dragon into Dimension-X. So once the thought solidified in Erik's mind of where it made the most sense, his sketches started coming in. When I picked up the latest SD issue, as I normally do, and actually saw Glum toss her into the Dimension it was pure fan-boy bliss. Totally added a whole new layer to the enjoyment I get from reading that series. Damn, I sure do love my job!!!

MN: You've produced art for companies like Marvel and DC and for the children's television series *Veggie Tales*, but many comic book readers may not be familiar with your work. Can you talk about your background and the projects you've worked on over the years?



F!: (laughs) Projects... what projects? Most folks are not familiar with my artwork because very little has seen the light of day. For example, I had my own series at Marvel. I drew three issues of that but unfortunately the timing was all wrong. The exact time Marvel wanted to distribute their comics was the time when my series was set to come out. To facilitate the transition to self-distribution they started to cut books from the schedule – so adding a new batch of books (my book included) had a snowball's chance in hell at the time. I got paid, I had fun working on it, but it never saw the light of day.

That was not the first time something like that has happened to me. Sure, that sorta thing happens to folks every now and then, but it happened to me time after time. I became the poster child for things falling apart at the 11th hour, through no fault of my own. I could have easily used that as an excuse to give up but I love comics through and through. Most folks probably would have wised up and gone elsewhere, but I stuck around, toiling in complete obscurity, and I've loved every minute of it.

Fortunately I did not have to be a starving artist the whole time. Homeboy gotta eat you know! I've done a lot of artwork for toy companies, animation studios, etc., etc. Far as comic art goes, I broke into the industry (thanks to Dave Campetti) drawing an issue of *Maze Agency*. I did the last issue of the series as a matter of fact. So I got in there just in time. I was a fan of Mike W. Barr and Alan Davis on *Batman and the Outsiders* so you can probably imagine what a kick that must have been for me to draw an issue of Mike Barr's pet project... I got to draw a comic book for reals finally... Good Lord that was Fun! The art sucked a lot. Thankfully I did not know just how bad I stunk at the time, or it would have paralyzed me... and boy did I have fun.

MN: What was your first big break in the mainstream?"

F!: My first big break into the mainstream was *Green Lantern Corps Quarterly #5*. I've always been a fan of the Green Lanterns so when word came I would get to draw a GL all I could think of was, "Great which one?" DC tells me I get to create my own from scratch. Wow! Major coolness!!! It's easy enough to draw a story with say, Spider-Man as the protagonist. I mean we all know what he looks like, right? You can just get in there and start drawing the story. But what if the story had Spider-Man in it but we did not know what he or his costume looked like yet. What if Ditko had not come along yet? That was the case for me. The concept was there but the visual was a completely blank slate. It had to be created from scratch before I could even start the first page. Creating characters from scratch has unintentionally become something of a trend for my little jaunt through Comixdom.

Even with my limited abilities I was really determined to play in the Big Leagues. Was never really a question of "if." It was more a question of "when" I would draw something for the Big Leagues, otherwise known as the "Big Two." This was way before Image Comics came along and kicked both of

their collective asses but good, and set the industry on fire with excitement. Gawd, I loved Image so much. I still do. Figured for sure my first gig would probably be on *Wonder Woman* or *She-Hulk* or some other "girl" book, because folks seem to respond to the way I draw women. Fans really dig it a lot but editors seemed to be from a whole other universe or something. I still can't figure some of them out to this day, but that's beside the point. This was all before the term "bad girls" was part of our vernacular. Nope, my first and only gig at DC was drawing this big, muscular Green Lantern guy. There wasn't a female to be found in that entire galaxy! It's not like I could have squeezed in a babe or two into the background or something either. It was wall-to-wall big, muscle guy and some pointy looking aliens. Don't wanna sound like I'm complaining, because that project was like heaven on earth for me. I was a happy camper and ADAM was a real joy to work on. He even made the cover... and they actually let me draw the darned thing. Can you imagine? The bloody fools! (laughs)

After *Green Lantern Corps Quarterly* #5 was done Triumphant Comics made me an offer I couldn't refuse. I got to work on the company's flagship title *Scavengers* and created tons of characters from scratch. Not only was it a blank slate, it was a team book, so I was creating my ass off. Their claim to fame was the company who had a serial number on the cover of every comic book they produced... so each one was one-of-a kind in a way. Ah yes, good times!

After I left *Scavengers*, Marvel came a'calling with what eventually became known (to a select few) as *Fusion Force*. I was like, "Awesome. Marvel wants me to co-create a whole team book of young teens?! I am so there." Around that time the writer and I created the Storm-Phoenix for a *What If* story. Which was basically an amalgam of two existing character. "What if Storm had the Power of Phoenix?" Wow, was I in heaven on that one little ditty. After that, I co-created a bunch of characters for Chaos Comics. And yeah, those never saw the light of day either. That's only touching on a few gigs... there were more that have never seen the light of day and I am thankful the mistakes I made during the learning curve have not been broadcast for everyone to see. Whew!



Looking back, everything from start to finish was an amazing learning experience on so many levels. It was all so exciting and new. I still feel the same excitement working on *She-Dragon* as I did back then when I was breaking into the industry. "Breaking in"... now that sounds like a punishable act; sounds like breaking and entering. Really glad I stuck with it, because I'm having the time of my life, now more than ever. *She-Dragon* has been such a blessing... really. People see the book and all they probably notice is big boobs or something...but to me, that is what a 'dream come true' looks like. No, not talking big boobs anymore. (laughs) I'm talking drawing something that I would normally buy, even if somebody else drew it. But I'm the guy who drew it, with one of my idols. Holy Crap! I just had another I'm not worthy moment. Man, I gotta stop doing that to myself.

Comics have been very good to me. Warts and all, it has been a great ride so far. And the best is yet to come.

MN: How would you describe your artistic style?



F!: Style is such a subjective word. How would YOU describe my style?

MN: I'd say your style is dynamic and hotgirlgasmic.

F!: (laughs) Good one Markisan, I think I'll use that one sometime. Style per 'se, has never been a conscious effort on my part. Up and coming artists ask me about 'style' and stuff all the time. Truth is, one can't help but to have a style or particular look to your artwork. It's like a fingerprint. Like it or not, it's there as soon as you touch the paper. I just push a pencil around a piece of paper and I'm constantly surprised by what comes out the other end. It rarely ends up looking the way I see it in my head, but it's fun as heck to keep trying to make heads or tails out of it. Some

days it is easier than others... but I would rather have a suck-day doing something I love, as opposed to a suck-day on a job I hate any day.

MN: What is it about the character She-Dragon that interests you?

FI: Um, have you actually seen what she looks like? Yowza! (laughs)

All kidding aside, She-Dragon is a lot of fun to draw and I love her big time. The real draw (no pun intended) for me was working with Erik Larsen. I'm such a huge fan of his work that if he had asked me to draw the adventures of "Skippy the Paper Clip from Outer Space" I would've been all over that. (laughs) I'm really grateful that the Finheads have embraced my artwork on this project. Having their seal of approval means so much to me!

MN: As a Finhead myself, I demand to see "Skippy the Paper Clip." Make it happen, Franchesco!

FI: (laughs) I'll see what I can do, Markisan.

MN: Last time *Savage Dragon* readers saw She-Dragon, she was tossed into Dimension-X after a tussle with Mr. Glum (a pint-sized, crimson alien who has taken control of Earth and wants to kill Savage Dragon). Can you talk a bit about the story? Where will this one-shot take She-Dragon?

FI: Dimension-X is a primordial soup of cosmic proportions, making it an incredibly fertile playground for She-Dragon. It's filled with unlimited possibilities and uncharted territories. I encourage your readers to head to their friendly neighborhood comic book store and check out the full color 48-pager. Well, that's not exactly right. I say 48-pager on reflex. We recently upped the page count with additional goodness, so the issue has swelled to 64 full color pages! We're not charging a thin dime more for it either. Keeping the same low cover price, while making it more special for the fans and retailers was really rewarding for me. If folks are not familiar with some of the better comic shops in their areas that are supporting the *She-Dragon* "really special" *Special*, I recommend the [comic shop locator service](#). It's free and it's easy to use. Please support your local retailers. Without them, the whole industry could crumble into dust. I hope the book does really well for them.

Back to your original point, Markisan, I have difficulty answering this kind of question. I've made a conscious decision to not talk specifics about the storyline from day one. The information landscape for readers is completely different from when I first started collecting comics. Back then there was no distributor catalog, no previews, no solicitations, no Internet, no fan sites, no message boards... no nothing. I would just go to the comic book store and pick up the latest issues of my favorite comics. I didn't know what was going to happen next. It was rare to even know what the next cover looked like unless the publisher printed it in the letters page. Knowing what would happen ahead of time wasn't even an option, since most of the "next issue" blurbs were misleading in a good way. So the possibility did not even enter my thought process. The result made the story that much better and more fun. What's the point of seeing a movie if the trailer reveals most of the major scenes? It just leaves us with that empty feeling afterwards. It's like seeing the movie before we actually sit down to see the movie.

Out of respect for the readers who plan to collect the issue, "mum" has been the word. I don't want to risk spoiling the experience for the readers in any way. When putting together the *She-Dragon sketchbook* I did my best to keep the storyline portion to a bare-bones minimum and relegated the majority to behind the scenes art, sketches and various sundries that had already seen the light of day. Coincidentally, it's the stuff I enjoy looking at in other people's work, so I guess it all works out. I want today's readers to feel the way I did when I got home and attacked my pile of back issues and new comics. It's been really difficult to stay tight lipped about something I wanna shout about from the rooftops! So, as they say, "This bud's for you!" folks.

MN: Fair enough. Can you say whether or not *She-Dragon* has any significant effect on the monthly *Savage Dragon* book?

FI: I'd like to think so, but my arrogance is really good at making me feel like the Sun revolves around me sometimes. I can't believe there actually was a time in our history when people were put to death

for saying the Sun was the center of our solar system and not the Earth... but I digress.

She-Dragon springs forth directly from the pages of *Savage Dragon*. I haven't seen that sorta thing done in quite the same way in comics. This boggles the mind considering the sheer number of comics that come out each and every week, multiplied by all the months and years that comics have been around. The *She-Dragon Special* leads directly into *Savage Dragon #128* due next month, featuring those lovable lawbreakers from Mark Millar and J.G. Jones' caustic classic *Wanted*. It don't get mo' better than dat. Originally we would've had to wait until *Savage Dragon* caught up in continuity, but now it fits seamlessly like hand in power-glove. So we can all just pretend we planned it that way. Yup, we delayed *She-Dragon* on purpose... um, that's the story and I'm sticking to it. (laughs)



MN: (laughs)

Can readers unfamiliar with She-Dragon's history still enjoy this one-shot?

FI: Absolutely. Erik is a master at his craft. His mindset was similar to my own. We wanted the one-shot to have an actual story with a beginning, middle and end that stood on its own. What's the point otherwise, right?

MN: Right.

FI: People who aren't familiar with the mythology Erik Larsen has created in the pages of the *Savage Dragon* don't have to pick up the entire run of the series. No research will be necessary. But don't forget, there will be a test after the interview is done, so I hope you're taking notes. (laughs) The story is self-contained. It is my hope that those folks who pick up this one-shot for whatever reason – whether it's the story, the art, the subject matter or they just need a swanky paper weight – will get a chance to see a sliver of the wonderful extravaganza Erik has crafted over the years. That makes me feel good. If my artwork can get even one person to take a look at the cast of characters Erik comes up with in the flagship title, then that reader is in for a real treat once they check out the *Savage Dragon*. That would be really cool to see happen.

For the life of me, I can't imagine any *Savage Dragon* fan NOT picking up *She-Dragon*. Sure, the possibility exists that people who read the flagship title may not pick up this one-shot, but that really does not compute. I mean seriously, why wouldn't they? Plus, the artwork is freaking awesome! (laughs) Lest we forget, the Sun revolves around me. It's ALL about me. Me, me, me! "But enough about me. What do you think about me?" (laughs)

MN: (laughs) Enough about you, dammit. What was it like to work with Erik Larsen on this project?

FI: (laughs)

Let me see now... um, what's it like to work with one of your idols? What is it like to work with someone who I really respect and admire? What is it like to work with someone whose work I really enjoy?



MN: Hey, I get to ask the questions around here.

FI: (laughs) It's a total head-trip, Markisan. It's like the best of the best. I love it lots. And at the same time there is that part of me that is screaming inside, "I'm not worthy! I'm not worthy!" That fact is not news to Erik. He has gone out of his way to try to make me feel comfortable and at ease. But every now and then I'll be talking to him like it's no big deal and then the realization hits me out of nowhere – "Oh my Gawd! I'm like talking to Erik Larsen!" Luckily the feeling passes and I don't literally go running out of the room screaming like a total nutjob. Not only would that creep the guy out, it would make it next to impossible to work together. (laughs)

MN: (laughs) Did you draw straight from Erik's script or was this more of a collaborative project?

FI: I've drawn from scripts in the past but this particular project is a horse of a different color. The fun thing about the comics medium is that the sky is the limit with very few restrictions. Since I'm familiar with Erik's characters there was no real need for anything formal or overly specific. The upside is that the story progressed in a very natural and organic fashion. It's the only project I have worked on that I did not know the end of the story before I started to draw the first page. So the discovery part was alive and well to the very end. That kind of approach can also have some serious pitfalls, but not in this case. Can you imagine doing that sorta thing with a big budget motion picture? Yeah right! (laughs) But in comics you can totally get away with that sorta thing, and have a blast doing it!!!

We started off with Erik sending me some rough layouts/thumbnails (those were always fun to see). For those out there unfamiliar with the term, Erik basically sent me what he envisioned the page to look like with some glorified stick figures scrawled across the page. I didn't need to see dialogue or any sort of detailed stage direction, since I pretty much knew what he was going for... and they were THAT good. I used them as a starting point and let the art go where it wanted to. It was a fun and organic approach that worked out really well.

Eventually we didn't even go the 'stick-figure' route... actually it's not fair to call them glorified stick figures. What he sent me have so much charm to them; very raw, rough, expressive and pure Erik Larsen. And you'll get to see some in the back of the *Special*. It was really fun stuff to see pop up when they did. It was like early Christmas presents each and every time. The second half of the issue was Erik basically jotting down some thoughts in an email and I just took it from there. So we went the basic plot route at the end, which was just fine by me. It's all good really.

MN: *She-Dragon* was originally supposed to come out in February 2005 for Valentine's Day. Why has there been such a delay on its release?

FI: I try not to think about that. We delayed it "on purpose" (nudge nudge, wink wink) remember?

MN: Oh yeah... all part of the plan. Gotcha. (laughs)

FI: In life there are things that we have very little or zero control over, so we just try to make the best of what comes our way I'm just happy Erik blessed me with this project, given his intense workload. He could have easily gotten someone else to write it, or script it, or letter it, or color it... yeah, that's right. You read that right. He's coloring. Any of those things could have been done differently but I don't think the end results would be nearly as cool as they are now. I wish the fans didn't have to wait so long, but we worked really hard to make it worth their time... and I hope they really enjoy it.

I was deliriously happy to draw one of Erik's stories featuring his characters. That alone would've been worth the price of admission for me. Once I handed in the final art for the cover I brought up the subject of who we should get to color it. Before I could rattle off my short wish list, Erik was like, "I wanna color this cover." THAT totally blew my mind. I didn't consider that because I didn't realize it was an option. I mean the guy was running Image Comics full time, he was doing most if not all the duties on his monthly book, he was writing this one-shot for me... and now he wanted to color my cover too? Sweet! I said, "Great! Go for it!"

The next day I saw the colored piece and my jaw hits the floor. I fell out of my chair. It was just drop dead gorgeous. Soon as I got up off the floor, I did the happy-dance. When Erik said he wanted to color the interiors as well, I was really flattered. Life is good. It's not like the guy has nothing better to do, right? Since then Erik has decided to not only write/pencil/ink his ongoing book, but also colors and letters it as well. I guess the only thing that's left for him to do is put in the staples himself! (laughs) I mean, what else is there? The boy is crazy good... dammit! He still inspires me to be a better artist to this day.

MN: So, you've finished drawing the book then?

FI: Yes. I finished drawing the book and I'm looking forward to seeing the issue hit the stands around

the time the San Diego ComicCon International rolls around.

MN: Are there any plans for a *She-Dragon* sequel?

F!: Good question. That is up to the fans really. They are the ones with all the power here. If the book does well "at the box office" then the people will have spoken. I would love to let them eat cake. And by cake I mean "cheesecake." And by "cheesecake" I mean She-Dragon. Yummm!

MN: Are you interested in drawing stories for other supporting characters from *Savage Dragon*?

F!: I sure am. If Erik is part of the equation, I'd even be up for that "Zippy the Paper Clip from Outer Space." (laughs)

MN: I really need to see the Zip Clip before I die. (laughs)

So, any other projects in the works?

F!: I'd like to tell you all about them but confidentiality agreements preclude me from spilling the beans. Suffice to say that my fans will get a chance to see some marvelous fan-favorites drawn up Franchesco-style in the very near future.

I also wrapped up some artwork for Simon & Schuster recently. Two more books for them are on the schedule. I've got some other fun stuff in the wings as well. Aside from that there is always the occasional cover, or pin-up, or something fun that comes along that I just can't say "no" to. And to those of you who have been waiting patiently on a commission to add to your art collection, thank you for your eternal patience and understanding.



My fans really are the best. I am one lucky you-know-what. Thank you all for sticking with me through thick and thin. Without you, I am nothing.

For a five-page preview of *She-Dragon* click [HERE](#).