

The Independent features Big Mouth Productions

The Girl Team
Joining Forces to Do It Themselves

By Elizabeth Angell

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While there are alarmingly few women helming movies these days, there are more and more behind the scenes. The role of producer is one that seems increasingly open to the industry's women and here, *The Independent* profiles female production teams who are changing the industry, one little movie at a time.

Big Mouth Productions Katy Chevigny and Dallas Brennan

Katy Chevigny and Dallas Brennan sit at desks only six feet apart in their loft-like office space at Big Mouth Productions on 14th Street in New York City. They are separated by a large bookcase laden with the usual small-office paraphernalia: haphazard piles of books and tapes, folders, and binders labeled by hand. They have little privacy and though, as partners, they run Big Mouth, their corner of office real estate is not particularly awe-inspiring. Chevigny, thirty-five, and Brennan, thirty-one, could be any harried young women at the helm of a fledgling business.

But it is this very arrangement--the office, the desks, the trappings of entrepreneurship--that makes Big Mouth such an unusual engine for documentary production. "A lot of people make documentaries out of their living rooms," says Brennan. "It's more feasible financially, but the burnout factor is much higher. They make one or two films and then they can't face it again."

Chevigny and Brennan work hard to carry the overhead of an office and staff because they want to be more than just independent producers who work project to project. "We wanted a certain continuity of staff across time and films," says Chevigny, who founded Big Mouth with her friend and college classmate Julia Pimsleur in 1997. She had begun her career as a social worker, and then moved on to film production in Chicago. At Big Mouth, she and Pimsleur produced a series of social issue documentaries together. When Pimsleur left two years ago, Brennan became a senior producer. Big Mouth's sixth film, *Deadline*, premiered earlier this year at Sundance.

Big Mouth's longevity is a sure sign of success, but Chevigny and Brennan still struggle to find funding for their films. "It doesn't necessarily get easier," says Brennan. "You don't have too many laurels to rest on. Of course, we also don't have to ask ourselves 'did we sell out?'" Adds Chevigny, "The moral high ground is definitely ours."

They do see signs that the market for documentaries--especially serious-minded ones--may be changing. 2003 was a big year for documentaries, and distributors are much more interested in the medium. When Chevigny and Brennan sent out the press release for Deadline's Sundance premiere, they were flooded with phone calls from agents and publicists. That had never happened before. "They must think they will be able to make money on documentaries," says Chevigny.

Despite their still-chronic lack of funds--for now a fact of life for all documentary producers--the Big Mouth strategy must be working. Chevigny and Brennan don't appear burnt out. They'll still fill in as boom operators or craft services on a shoot, and they'll spend weeks traveling with their film. They often find themselves doubling up in inexpensive hotel rooms on the road. That, says Chevigny, may be the biggest difference between Big Mouth's partners and their male counterparts: "Controlling for all other factors, guys in our level in the business are not as willing to share a bed."