



MOVIES

The Woman Behind 'Navy SEALs' : Movies: A radical feminist producer calls the shots in the macho action-thriller. 'I think it is feminist, humanist to hate terrorism,' she says.

BY DAVID WALLACE

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“Barroooooom!” A ramshackle Beirut building collapses in a cloud of blazing orange flame. “Ak-ak-ak-ak-ak-ak!” The sub-machine guns and Kalishnikov rifles spit fire and death. “Craaaack!” Blood spurts and brains splatter as one of the good guys is executed by a Middle Eastern terrorist.

Meet Orion’s “Navy SEALs,” the latest entry in this summer’s parade of action-adventure films where the body count and expletives run high and the prop blood flows freely. Like most of the others, this is a mostly men-only story, the one female role could be filled by a man. The love interest: nil. The main relationship is one where co-stars Charlie Sheen and Michael Biehn try to out-tough one another. Weapons, tough guys, more blood, more bodies. “Tag ‘em and bag ‘em,” says one character.

But wait a minute. On the screen credits, we see this: “A Brenda Feigen Production.” Brenda Feigen? *The* Brenda Feigen? The to-the-barricades radical feminist of the ‘60s and ‘70s? What on earth is she doing producing a film light-years from what one thinks of as a “woman’s” movie, a film that celebrates with a vengeance a gung-ho organization that is one of the very few military operations left still prohibiting women (because of its state of constant combat readiness)?

The SEALs, by the way, are an elite force of 1,200 men, descended from World War II’s Frogmen (a term they still use for themselves) and created in 1962 by John F. Kennedy, who saw a future need for highly-trained teams that could be mobilized fast for hazardous reconnaissance and counterterrorism action.

Feigen, still a radical feminist and whose hazel eyes blaze with the intensity of her commitment, sees no conflict between her personal philosophy and this, her first film production: “If this movie had been made about dropping nuclear bombs, I never would have done it,” she says. “But I think it is feminist, humanist to hate terrorism. It is natural and logical. I had no problem making a movie about the guys who go after these people. I may be a feminist but I don’t want to be blown up by a terrorist’s bomb any more than anyone else.”

At 46, deeply tanned and with streaked blond hair, Feigen says she has been a feminist all her life. Her passionate commitment to the

cause, however, began soon after she entered Harvard Law School in 1966.

“They had ‘ladies day’ then,” she recalls, “the one day in the year when women in the classes were called on. I remember in Criminal Law the professor called on women to discuss how much penetration constitutes rape and in Property Law class called on us to discuss who actually owned the engagement ring when an engagement is called off! Totally sexist.

“I was instrumental in integrating Lincoln’s Inn, the eating club for the law school that had never allowed women, and the squash courts so I wouldn’t have to disguise myself as a man to play--which I had

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(they divorced in 1987). “Just as I was graduating I was contacted by (the National Organization for Women) to run for national vice president for legislation,” where she was in charge of hearings on women’s legal rights.

In May, 1970, she and her husband moved to New York where Feigen and Gloria Steinem eventually started the Women’s Action Alliance and Ms. Magazine. Steinem recalls the early days of the magazine: “In a way it was her idea. Together we had formed the Womens Action Alliance which is basically an information center.

We were initially thinking of a newsletter and Brenda said no, it should be a real magazine . . . she was in on the founding.”

“I learned, many years later,” Feigen smiles, “that that was what gave me the honor of having a CIA file started on me,” which she discovered in 1976 under the Freedom of Information Act.

Feigen then was offered the job of running the Women’s Rights Project of the ACLU which, after two years, she left to go into a law partnership with her husband. In 1978, she ran for the New York State Senate from New York’s silk-stocking district. Feigen lost by 3% to a candidate who spent \$600,000 to her \$38,000.

In 1982, she joined the New York office of the William Morris Agency, first as a business affairs attorney and then as an agent (her clients included Jane Alexander, Karen Allen and Loretta Swit), eventually segueing into the production of “Navy SEALs.” “I’m glad I lost that election,” she laughs, “or I might still be in Albany instead of having produced my first film.”

Through a writer client she met Chuck Pfarrer, an active duty SEAL writing screenplays in his spare time. “I tried to talk to him about it,” she recalls, “but couldn’t get much information. When the Achille Lauro happened he disappeared, and when the Pakistani jet was hijacked he disappeared again. He kept disappearing. . . . Chuck was the commander of the counter-terrorist SEAL team from the Atlantic Fleet.

“The mortality rate among these guys is about 40% and I kept telling him he should leave.”

Pfarrer eventually did retire and wrote the first screenplay.

“I took it to Orion,” she says. “The minute they got it they called and said they wanted it, and by the next day it was a done deal.”

Richard Marquand was hired as director, and all was ready to go when his death stopped all work. By September, 1989, a new director (Lewis Teague, “Jewel of the Nile”) was on board, and filming commenced in Spain and Norfolk, Va. “Navy SEALs” was made without active Navy support because of the top-secret nature of the SEAL’s activities, said Capt. Tom Lawson, commander of the Naval Special Warfare Center in Coronado. “Now, they’re all over it,” Feigen adds.

Feigen claims she imposed her woman’s viewpoint in many places in the film. “There were some pretty bad things that came in a number of the drafts, and I said, ‘I’m sorry guys, no way!’ There were scenes with the role of Claire (co-star Joanne Whalley-Kilmer) that made no sense . . . and in one instance there was a reference to her so obscene I can’t repeat it. . . . I said this has got to go!

“In the (various) scripts there was a lot more shooting than there needed to be. I remember saying to Chuck, ‘Don’t you guys ever do anything else to keep people quiet?’ and he said, ‘Yes, but using a gun is the most efficient way.’ The script would say things like ‘and

his head was blown off. . . .’ I said that this is not going to be. As it turned out it was also cheaper,” she laughs.

“And there was one scene where each one of the guys was with what they call ‘frog hogs,’ ” (a SEALs term for female groupies), “including an unnecessary amount of sexual activity that had nothing to do with feelings. That’s all gone.”

Feigen adds that “the guys” also made it pretty clear to her that she would be in the way when they visited bars frequented by SEALs in San Diego. “When you’re not a SEAL and not ‘one of the guys,’ if you are a woman producer in a movie like this you seem almost expendable. I took exception to that every time it happened.

“I believe if I had been a male producer there would have been no question about a lot of the things I had to fight for.”

Feigen’s next films are far more what one would expect from a feminist: “Inalienable Right” is a two-hour CBS-TV movie about two black girls in the South sterilized without their knowledge, and based on a case she became familiar with while working with the ACLU; “Grounded” is a “9-to-5” type film about airline attendants, to be made with Jane Fonda for Columbia.

She is also developing a film project planned to star Meg Ryan and based loosely on Feigen’s own experiences in the early days of the women’s movement. And there is talk of two sequels to “Navy SEALs.”

Feigen says she does regret having “Navy SEALs” as her calling card to Hollywood instead of one of the other projects. “I think that if you are a woman producer, if you get typecast as doing ‘soft’ movies, it’s very hard to break that mold. ‘Navy SEALs’ was a film I knew I had to make because the stuff is so good and the story is not about nothing . . . what drew me to it was its substance. . . .

“ ‘Total Recall’ and ‘Die Hard’ are fantasy, futuristic movies. My film is action-adventure, but it’s real, about real situations that could happen like ‘China Syndrome’ could happen. It also happened to be the first,” she smiles.

If Feigen doesn’t fit into the film industry’s mold, she certainly is enjoying its rewards. But none of this is incompatible with her political beliefs, she says.

“I don’t think there is anything inconsistent with making a lot of money and being a feminist. I think it’s important, though, to realize what your priorities are and who you give money to.”

And no, she doesn’t intend to quit railing against the system as strongly as she did 25 years ago. “It’s important that women have the same power as men in order to control the creative process--at least have half of the control,” she says. “There is an audience out there that does not want to see all these macho movies as much as they want to see movies about real people including real women.

“I intend to be in the forefront of trying to change this.”

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