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Changing Times for Lesbians on Film

by [Allison Steinberg](#), Contributing Writer April 22, 2007

The Hollywood studio system brings to mind big production budgets, blockbuster mainstream hits and star-studded premieres. But the six major companies that produce the vast majority of Hollywood's films — Fox, Paramount, Sony, NBC Universal, Time Warner and Disney — are now scrambling to compete in a rapidly changing movie business.

Last summer, studios laid off hundreds of employees, canceled films with big-name stars (and their big paychecks), and consumers continued to drift from theaters to iPods, DVDs and other on-demand programming. What does this mean for lesbian films? As Hollywood tries to accommodate this shift in consumer behavior, it is creating more niche productions, which could mean, ultimately, more queer-themed movies. And as filmmaking technology becomes more affordable and distribution methods move beyond traditional theaters, there are more opportunities than ever before to make lesbian films and get them seen by lesbian viewers.

Find Your Niche

The increasing popularity of documentaries and independent films has helped pave the way for more indie titles to be made. Michael Moore's 2004 documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* set the stage as the first documentary to gross \$21.8 million in its first three days, topping all the other Hollywood flicks that weekend.



That same year, Sony Pictures Classics — a subsidiary of Sony that distributes niche-oriented titles — released *Saving Face*, out writer-director Alice Wu's first feature-length film. *Saving Face* tells the story of 28-year-old Chinese-American Wil Pang (Michelle Krusiec), a young doctor who falls for Vivian (Lynn Chen). The film, which was produced by Will Smith's Overbrook Entertainment, was shot on a tight budget in 27 days, and was released theatrically about six months after it opened at the Toronto Film Festival. It ultimately grossed a little over \$1 million theatrically — not a blockbuster by any means, but a supreme success for a bilingual film (*Saving Face* is in both English and Mandarin Chinese) about a lesbian romance

from an unknown director.

For every lesbian film that finds its own niche success at the box office, there is one that did not. In 2005, Fox Searchlight, a subsidiary of Twentieth Century Fox, released the lesbian-themed romantic comedy *Imagine Me & You*. Written and directed by Ol Parker and starring Piper Perabo and [Lena Headey](#), the film grossed \$672,000 in the United States with an additional \$1.7 million overseas, totaling approximately \$2.4 million overall.



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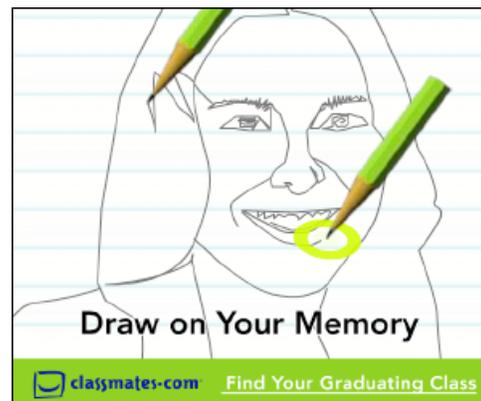
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Originally intended to be a heterosexual tale, the film was still positioned as a mainstream film even after the story took a lesbian turn — on the day of her wedding to a man, Piper Perabo's character falls in love with Lena Headey's character. "I really wanted to write the script in such a way that, although there's a same-sex love story involved, an audience of my parents and their friends would enjoy it," stated director and writer Ol Parker in the film's production notes.



Angela Robinson's 2004 film, ***D.E.B.S.***, which had a \$3.5 million production budget, only grossed approximately \$96,800 theatrically. In a panel discussion titled "Celluloid Sisters: Why Queer Women Need to Make More Movies" at the Queer Media and Entertainment Conference (Q-Me Con) in Los Angeles on April 15, Lisa Thrasher, POWER UP's President of Film Production and Distribution, noted that *D.E.B.S.* was never marketed to a gay audience — despite the fact that a lesbian romance is at the heart of the film.

"They had a big advertising budget; the problem is they put it all on internet advertising on teen websites," said Thrasher at the panel. "They were thinking it was going to be a teen film like *Mean Girls* or something like that; they did not market at all to the gay audience." [Editor's note: Screen Gems did heavily market the theatrical release of *D.E.B.S.* on AfterEllen.com.]

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