

It Takes Two to Fight Over a Documentary

By TOM ROSTON

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WHEN David Redmon and Ashley Sabin were first falling in love, they took a trip to Mexico. Not that kind of trip. They went to shoot a documentary about the squalid conditions of the workers who make Victoria's Secret bags. The film never took shape, but the relationship flourished.

"It was pretty romantic," said Ms. Sabin, who recalled being chased by a security detail to the American border. "It was also pretty rugged. It was an interesting way to get to know each other."

Eight years and five completed films later Mr. Redmon and Ms. Sabin, who plan to marry in June, are a documentary directing team that has navigated the tricky terrain of balancing their personal life with making nonfiction films together. Their latest, "Downeast," about the reopening of a seafood plant in Maine, is screening at the [Tribeca Film Festival](#) this weekend.

"The work carries over to the apartment, and into bed, and

over to the next morning at breakfast,” Mr. Redmon said. “It’s a triangular relationship.”

Documentary directing teams — whether fiancées, best friends, siblings, spouses, or even exes — are standard in an industry not known for its remunerative prospects. On a tight budget two people can do most of the labor on a film, which can take many years to complete. It’s a formula that has proven successful.

“We are greater than the sum of our parts,” said Dan Lindsay about working with his friend T. J. Martin, with whom he won this year’s Academy Award for best documentary feature, for [“Undeclared.”](#) “I make better material with T. J. than I would on my own.”

Before the advent of digital cameras, making a documentary required a two-member crew “that could be synchronous,” said D. A. Pennebaker, who has directed more than a dozen films with his wife, Chris Hegedus, including [“The War Room”](#) (1993). With the mobile filmmaking equipment that Mr. Pennebaker helped develop in the 1960s one person held the camera, and the other handled the sound.

That division of labor — which resulted in each director having a different perspective on the action — was most effective in teams that had “an equality of opinion, where you couldn’t railroad the other person,” he said. “Plus, when you

had to make sense of what you were filming, two heads were better than one.”

Even with digital equipment that now allows directors to work solo, partnerships still abound. “We are almost more intertwined than I am with my husband,” Heidi Ewing said of Rachel Grady, with whom she created the production company Loki Films. “With Rachel there’s creativity, finances and reputation at stake.”

Ms. Ewing and Ms. Grady prefer to divide their time in the field, so that one of them can look at the video in the editing room with fresh eyes. On their first feature together, “[The Boys of Baraka](#),” about Baltimore students attending a boarding school in Kenya, Ms. Grady was on location when the subjects played a graphic game of cops and robbers. In the moment she felt that the material she was capturing was exploitative, she said.

When Ms. Ewing saw the sequence, she said it would be the perfect way to open the film. The two argued until they agreed. “It became the heart of the movie,” Ms. Grady said. “And I love it.”

Disagreements are an inherent, and productive, part of their working relationship, Ms. Grady added. “You’ve got creativity, money and ego involved,” she said. “These are the ingredients for explosions.”

For Bill and Turner Ross, brothers who have directed two films together, the tensions that arise can mean reverting to adolescent modes of engagement. During an all-night shoot in New Orleans for their second film, “Tchoupitoulas,” which has yet to be released, the two got into a fight in which Turner, now 29, slammed his brother’s face against a door. The older Mr. Ross, 32, attributed the episode to stress, alcohol and his brother’s “digging in too deep.”

The younger Mr. Ross agreed: “When you know someone that intimately, you can really hurt them.”

Ms. Hegedus said that she and Mr. Pennebaker “usually get divorced once or twice during the editing of a film,” and, in truth, many relationships have been sundered. Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski, who won an Oscar for the 2004 documentary “[Born Into Brothels](#),” were involved romantically for the first two years of a film that took four years to complete.

“That was harder than anything I’ve been through, but we decided that our personal lives were less important than the film,” said Mr. Kauffman, who refers to the eight children in the documentary, as well as the film itself, as his and Ms. Briski’s “nine stepkids.”

Ms. Sabin and Mr. Redmon reached a very “volatile core” on their previous film, “[Girl Model](#),” which will be released this

summer. “In the beginning our voice was one voice, but by ‘Girl Model’ we had very strong, very different, opinions,” Ms. Sabin said. “I regret where it took us as a couple, but it was really important for our growth as filmmakers.”

To help mend the relationship Ms. Sabin took a lesser role in “Downeast” and will be stepping away from filmmaking and doing graduate work in film studies in the fall.

Mr. Redmon and Ms. Sabin might learn from the experience of Julia Reichert, who started directing films in the 1970s with Jim Klein, with whom she has a daughter.

After her personal relationship with Mr. Klein dissolved, Ms. Reichert became involved with another filmmaker, Steven Bogner. The two decided not to direct films together, a resolution that lasted 10 years, until they partnered on “[A Lion in the House](#),” a 2006 film about children with cancer. And so, the couple developed two ground rules for co-directing: never talk about the film while drinking and never in the bedroom.

“We break those rules on occasion,” said Mr. Bogner, who added that those creative disagreements tend not to fester. “Sometimes we’ll have a stupid argument about who’s going to change the oil in the car, and it’s really to see who’s going to win the argument. But when we argue as directors, the conflict is more sincere. Because it’s about what makes the

best film.”