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Vancouver's Big Bad Boo Studios earning worldwide reputation for multicultural cartoons

BY PAUL LUKE, THE PROVINCE JANUARY 13, 2013

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STORY PHOTOS (1)



Shabnam Rezaei and her husband, Burnaby-raised entrepreneur Aly Jetha formed Big Bad Boo Studios, making Vancouver their production headquarters, with New York their sales and marketing office. Their goal is to sell culturally-rich cartoons that nurture language learning — and deliver fun along the way.

Photograph by: Big Bad Boo, Submitted

Cartoons stole Shabnam Rezaei's heart when she was a child but her head took another couple of decades to surrender to the same enchantment.

Rezaei runs Big Bad Boo Studios, a Vancouver-based animation house making a name for itself around the world with multi-cultural cartoons. Its award-winning 1001 Nights cartoon, based on the ancient Middle Eastern tales, is watched in 70 countries and 15 languages.

Rezaei, 39, is happy, fulfilled, challenged. That's fine — but she was supposed to be happy, fulfilled and challenged in a more virtuous field.

"An Iranian family puts a lot of pressure on you to do well and there are only a few professions respected in the culture," she says. "Literally, it's being a doctor or an engineer. Those are the only occupations — otherwise you're no good."

Rezaei's mother, a gynecologist, and her father, an engineer, would have been horrified if they thought cartoons were seeding their young daughter's future passion.

Rezaei's diet of Farsi language animation was interrupted at age 10 when her parents moved her and her brother from Tehran to Vienna. Her parents had feared her 13-year-old brother would be drafted when he turned 14 and tossed into the front lines in Iran's war with Iraq.

In Vienna, Rezaei attended an international school where classes were in English. After school, she learned German by watching Vicky the Viking, Maya the Bee and The Smurfs — auf Deutsch, baby.

Even today, Rezaei sustains her French-speaking skills by devotedly watching Musti, a popular French cartoon.

"If you put kids in front of a television showing a different language, within five days they'll begin to speak that language," she says.

Rezaei did well by the Smurfs. In 1995, she graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a dual degree — a BA in German Literature and a BSc in computer science.

An executive MBA from New York University came a few years later while Rezaei was working full-time for financial services firm Exis Consulting. It took two years of attending classes on alternate Fridays and Saturdays to earn the degree.

"I had absolutely no social life," she says. "I learned a lot."

Bored in New York

Rezaei moved on to Misys Banking Systems, also in New York. Misys listed on the London Stock Exchange while she was there, acquiring a market cap of more than a billion British pounds.

Things should have been terrific. She was making good money and her parents, impressed by her success, were cutting her oodles of slack.

But Rezaei was bored. Not by her work, employer, colleagues or clients. But by the future.

She asked herself what the best thing that could befall her at Misys would be. The answer was that she could become CEO.

That possibility left her heart cold.

"You kind of look in the mirror and go 'What the hell am I doing here if that's the greatest thing that could happen to me and I'm not excited about it?'"

On the side, she started PersianMirror.com, an online magazine about Persian culture. An American-Iranian working in animation contacted her through PersianMirror about a script called Babak and Friends — A First Norooz.

Using cartoons to expose children to different cultures

Rezaei and her husband, Burnaby-raised entrepreneur Aly Jetha, realized that exposing children to different cultures through cartoons was a good idea.

They formed Norooz Productions. In 2007, they learned of B.C.'s animation industry while visiting Jetha's mom in Vancouver.

The two renamed the company Big Bad Boo Studios in a play on 'Boo,' Jetha's nickname for his wife. They made Vancouver their production headquarters, with New York their sales and marketing office.

Their goal was to sell culturally rich cartoons that nurture language learning — and deliver fun along the way.

"We call ourselves president and president," she says. "We just divvy up the work based on our skill sets."

They soon discovered how hard it was for a small animation house to sell cartoons to giant broadcasters.

"Neither of us knew anything about this particular industry when we started," Rezaei says. "We thought if we brought a great idea to a TV station they would love us."

"It couldn't be further from the truth. It's very competitive and very difficult to secure funding."

Their solution was to launch Oznoz.com, their own distribution arm that makes available Big Bad Boo content and foreign language versions of shows such as Sesame Street.

Today, Rezaei and Jetha split their year between Vancouver and New York, making B.C. their base when production ramps up.

They're currently in pre-production on their third season of 1001 Nights, their most successful show so far. Last year, they produced five 1001 Nights comic books, which have sold about 200,000 copies in five languages of the Middle East.

Her parents have embraced the career choice of a daughter who's neither a doctor nor engineer. But they do have high expectations.

Rezaei's father used to read Scheherazade's tales from 1001 Nights to her as a child. When she told him two years ago they were going to animate the book, he paused before responding.

"You are lifting a very heavy rock," he said.

"He essentially meant this is a big job and you better do Scheherazade justice," she says. "I think we have."

Company Profile

Big Bad Boo Studios, a Vancouver-based animation company, is owned and run by the husband-wife team of Aly Jetha and Shabnam Rezaei. Shabnam grew up in Tehran and Vienna; Jetha was raised in Burnaby, graduating with a degree in international relations from University of B.C.

The pair had been having their animation done in the Philippines but switched to Vancouver in 2007 after discovering the Lower Mainland's talent pool on a family visit.

Annual revenues are about \$10 million a year.

It has a skeleton staff of 12 that grows to 80 people when it ramps up seasonal production. At peak employment, Big Bad Boo also draws on 40 more people from outside the company.

Cartoon production is an expensive business: It costs up to \$8 million to produce 52, 11-minute episodes of 1001 Nights.

Big Bad Boo's productions so far include the cartoons 1001 Nights, Mixed Nutz, and Barak and Friends — A First Norooz, a Persian New Year holiday special.

Mixed Nutz airs on channels such as PBS, Astra's World, and Gem TV Middle East.

Two other series, Gone Bananas and Astra's World, are in development.

Big Bad Boo is in the midst of pre-production on 1001 Nights, its most successful property to date. The award-winning show airs on channels Teletoon, Disney Asia and al Jazeera Children's, among others.

The company is hoping to close a contract with Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Iran's state broadcaster, that would see the series aired in Iran.

Oznoz.com, the company's online distribution channel, has launched about original properties in 12 languages from producers around the world such as Sesame Street and Franny's Feet. It hopes to boost that to about 300 properties this year.

As well as winning three Leo awards last year for 1001 Nights, Big Bad Boo received a B.C. export award for digital media and entertainment in 2012.

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