

THE PICTURES

BLOW-UP

By Peter Savodnik

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One Saturday afternoon, Gail Boykewich was in a small shed in the woods behind her parents' house, in Oakland, New Jersey, inflating a blow-



Illustration by Tom Bachtell

up doll with a very loud machine. When she was done, she placed the doll, which had no facial features, next to a cluster of others that had already been dressed and made up with wigs and masks. “If you overinflate, you can create leaks,” Boykewich said. She is twenty-nine, and she heads up East Coast operations for Inflatable Crowd, a Santa Monica-based company that offers movie directors a cheaper alternative to hiring real-life extras. “I’ve never seen a doll explode,” she said, “but if you don’t close the valves correctly they will probably stay inflated for a few hours, and then, after you dress them and bring them to the set, you’ll have a whole stadium of deflated dolls.”

Boykewich, who has short black hair and a matter-of-fact air, walked from the studio into her parents' house and switched on a laptop. She played a clip from "Gridiron Gang," a 2006 movie that stars Dwayne (the Rock) Johnson and is exactly the kind of film that Inflatable Crowd is made for. "That one looks a little funny," Boykewich said, pointing to an inflatable in the stadium whose face looked as if it were about to blow off. (Wind is a big problem on set with inflatables.) As Boykewich talked, her dog, a shepherd mix named Remy, wandered in. (Her mother said the dog was "terrified" of the inflatables at first.)

Inflatables—five hundred of them— play a role in a pivotal scene in "Salt," the Angelina Jolie thriller that opens Friday (the scene is set in St. Bartholomew's Church, on Park Avenue). They made their *début* in "Seabiscuit," in 2003. During filming, an assistant named Joe Biggins was given the task of creating a crowd for the racetrack scenes. Before then, cardboard cutouts had been the most popular way to save on extras. But a racetrack is not a stadium. The crowd, instead of wrapping around a field, sits on one side of the track; so, as the camera followed the horses around the track, the spectators would be revealed as a bunch of flat cutouts. "I saw some serious issues with the 2-D solution," Biggins said, "so I came up with the idea for an inflatable."

Biggins, who is now thirty-eight, commissioned a vinyl prototype and then ordered more than seven thousand blow-up dolls (they are just torsos) to fill Keeneland Race Course, in Lexington, Kentucky. Ten months later, he launched Inflatable Crowd. Since then, he has provided inflatables for more than eighty-five feature films and numerous TV commercials, ads, and videos (including Shakira's "Hips Don't Lie"). His crowds have ranged from two (a car commercial) to eleven thousand ("Cinderella Man").

A few years ago, Biggins was sued for patent infringement by a rival company called Crowd in a Box. Inflatable Crowd prevailed, and now Biggins is looking to expand. "Depending on the types of films that get made, it is equally possible for my company to have a good or a bad year during a recession," he said. "I suppose if the studios decide that audiences want more feel-good movies about underdog sports teams winning the championship game, it can't hurt."

Boykewich's job—she joined Inflatable Crowd in 2007, when the company was working on Clint Eastwood's "Changeling"—is to make the inflatables look lifelike. A graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Boykewich begins with a blank plastic mask and airbrushes it. ("For a white person," she said, "I'd start with an ochre and then add a little crimson.") Then she paints shadows around the eyes and sides of the face, and under the nose and chin. Finally, she adds details—lips, freckles, facial hair.

Sitting in her studio in the woods, surrounded by paints, pliers, a staple gun, and books on human anatomy, she talked about how annoying it is when “background”—movie-speak for extras—tamper with her art work. “An extra will look at an inflatable and say, ‘This is freaking me out!’ Or we hear tons of ‘This is my girlfriend!’ Or ‘Why did you take my girlfriend away?’ when you deflate them.” She went on, “Some of the extras get bored and mess with the dolls and steal their wigs, or cut the eyes out to be funny.” When you spend hours making a doll camera-ready, she said, “it doesn’t seem funny at all when an extra pretends that the dummy is giving him a blow job.” ♦

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