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SINGLE-MINDED

Busting gender roles, what a feat!

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She may look not look like someone who would throw herself off buildings or sword fight a room full of men, but filmmaker Amanda Micheli has more in common with the stuntwomen of her documentary "**Double Dare**" than one might imagine. Chief among them: an apparent need to walk a high-wire for her art.

"I've been working on this film since 1997, and I have not yet made a dime," chuckles Micheli, 32, in the sunny kitchen of the Potrero Hill home she shares with her boyfriend, Eric Shank, and her boxer, Ruby. "I was able to pay everyone who worked on it, and that felt so good. But to say it was a labor of love is an understatement."

That may change now that the dominoes have started falling in the right direction: "**Double Dare**" is finally in theaters (it opened Friday at the Roxie in San Francisco); it will be broadcast on PBS on May 31 and out on DVD on June 7.

"We intentionally did this in rapid succession," says Micheli, patting Ruby's head, "in order to build word of mouth."

The film festival circuit gave the movie an excellent start: "**Double Dare**" has won four awards in the past year -- including two audience awards. Which is not surprising; the film is a rousing, crowd-pleasing tribute to women who crash -- figuratively and literally -- through barriers as they make their way in the male-dominated profession of stunt work. The two heroines are so likable -- and so beautifully captured by Micheli -- that you not only root for them from the get-go, but you also leave the theater fervently hoping they succeed.

One is Jeannie Epper, arguably the best-known stuntwoman in the world, though she is miles from being a household name. The film follows her struggle to get work, now that she's in her 60s, and features clips of her in barroom brawls, crashing cars and leaping tall buildings in a single bound as the **double** for Wonder Woman in a 1970s television series. She is outspoken and unstoppable -- and the kind of grandmother all little boys (and many little girls) wish they had. In one scene, she helps the kids construct a ramp for doing daredevil leaps with their bikes. No knitting or fireside chats for this granny.

The second stuntwoman is Zoe Bell, whom Micheli started following when she was only 18 and the stunt **double** for Lucy Lawless in the "Xena: Warrior Princess" television series, filmed in her native New Zealand. A gymnast and martial artist, Bell is simply stunning in the things she is able to do. Fearless and seemingly impervious to pain, Bell is seen being repeatedly hoisted up on a wire and spun horizontally through the air, only to crash to the ground. Hard. And because she is dressed as Xena (i.e. a leather corset

and not much else), there is no padding to fall on. Each time she crashes, stagehands rush to help her, but she brushes them away.

Only once does a clearly pained Bell ask for time to recover. "It's dead, " she says, pointing to her limp arm.

"Even now when I watch that sequence I go, eek! Ack!" says Micheli, laughing.

Micheli also has this in common with her stars: a love of grueling physical activity. The Harvard graduate spent more than a decade on the U.S. women's national rugby team -- and spent part of the filming of "**Double Dare**" on crutches after three surgeries for a torn anterior cruciate ligament. "I felt like I could relate on that level," she says, smiling.

"**Double Dare**" is the second film Micheli's directed; her first, "Just for the Ride," about cowgirls on the women's pro rodeo circuit, won her a Student Academy Awards Silver Medal in the documentary category in 1996 when she was in her early 20s. She has also worked as cinematographer on such acclaimed films as "My Flesh and Blood" and "The Flute Player."

"Zoe and Jeannie definitely have similarities to the women of 'Just for the Ride,' " she says. "They are definitely trying to make their way in a men's club."

"**Double Dare**" follows both Bell and Epper until their paths fatefully cross. When "Xena" wraps after three years, Bell finds herself without work. Like Epper in "Wonder Woman," Bell is not given film credit for risking life and limb on the show. She leaves New Zealand to seek work in L.A., where she connects with Epper, who becomes her mentor and helps introduce her to the rough world of movie stunts. Their relationship is at the heart of the film.

"As soon as they met each other, they were like old girlfriends, leaping on the bed in their underwear," says Micheli, who is still in close contact with both women. "The fact that they developed this mentor relationship is great and rare. I hope it encourages other women to do the same."

Epper escorts Bell to the most important audition of her young life -- for Quentin Tarantino, who is casting for doubles for Uma Thurman in "Kill Bill." After the grueling tryout, Bell is at Epper's home icing her owies when the phone rings, and the door to her future opens up. Tarantino was mightily impressed and can she leave directly for filming in Beijing?

It's a true hankie moment, as Bell screams like a joyful adolescent and is embraced by a proud Epper.

"That was my favorite scene -- and I almost missed it by leaving too early," says Micheli. "I hung around, and hung around through call after call, but it finally came."

She credits Tarantino for helping "**Double Dare**" with fund-raising -- hosting a party himself -- and finding distributors.

"Quentin was great; when Zoe got the audition I just showed up with my little camera and he was cool. And when she got the role, I went to Beijing and just planted myself. He doesn't normally allow other

cameras on set, but he totally got what we were doing. Since then he's really stuck his neck out for us; he's a huge fan of independent film."

Micheli notes that since Sept. 11, documentaries have been more about issues, which may have weighed against "**Double Dare**." "It's not a social or political film -- although I think that it is a film that both entertains and deals with issues. It's not a stretch to say it is a feminist film."

She laughs.

"But come on -- you've got great-looking young women in leather corsets kicking ass! What's not to like?"

There are notes of sobering reality at the end of the film: At the end of the "Kill Bill" filming, Bell seriously injures her arm and is out of work for a year -- although she has since recovered and doubled for Sharon Stone in the recent "Catwoman," during which she had to execute a 220-foot fall off a building on a thin wire. Epper is still having a hard time getting work, and has yet to land a job as stunt coordinator. They are still thick as thieves.

"People say they think this has a happy ending, but I think it's bittersweet. Yes, they've made some progress, but there is so much left to be made," sighs Micheli. "But I also think this film is about the larger issues: how to forge your own identity when no one else can do it for you. How to come back from setbacks and prejudices and gain more strength from the experience. That's what I hope people take away."