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Amanda Micheli and her wonder women

By Sean Uyehara

When Bay Area filmmaker Amanda Micheli approaches you can see that she is an athlete. She is sure of herself. She has a magnetic smile, great stories and has steadily built an impressive history of documentary and commercial filmmaking work. Her student thesis at Harvard won a Student Academy Award, and her feature length directorial debut “Double Dare” — about the work and lives of two female stuntwomen — has screened worldwide, including at the San Francisco International Film Festival (2004). She shot and produced “Cat Dancers,” which just premiered at the SXSW Film Festival, where it won a Special Jury Prize. And, most recently, she has been to Colombia where she documented a beauty pageant taking place in a Bogotá women’s prison. This newest project currently entitled “El Reinado” [SF360.org editor’s note, Oct. 17, 2007: The film has since been retitled “La Corona” (“The Crown”)] is being co-directed with her old friend Isabel Vega. SF360 sat down with her for lessons in documentary and rugby lingo.

SF360: Where are you from?

Amanda Micheli: Boston, Mass.

SF360: So, that’s the Harvard connection?

Micheli: Actually, when it came time for college, I was ready to leave Boston in a big way, so I went to check out schools in California. I knew that I wanted to work in film, but none of the programs out here seemed like a good match at the time. Despite my initial hesitations about it, I am really lucky that I ended up at Harvard. They have great teachers like Ross McElwee and Rob Moss, a slew of 16mm cameras, Nagras, Steenbecks... all of that... but the film program is part of the general Liberal Arts major.

SF360: So, you weren't really only studying film, like you might in a Cinema School for instance?

Micheli: Right. I was glad to be in contact with kids from all walks of life — they weren't all Hollywood-hungry Spielberg wanna-be's. And the film department there is a well-kept secret, so the classes are small and you get unbelievable access to 16mm film equipment.

SF360: And you played rugby.

Micheli: Yep. I kind of occupied two worlds — sports and art — and probably still do. But, the metaphor — you know, sports as a microcosm for whatever larger challenges we face in 'real life' — fits right in with filmmaking and still influences me. You know, when I am finishing a film or even just shooting a challenging scene, I am thinking — 'It's the last five minutes of the game; how is my crew, my team, going to get through this? We all feel like we're going to die but I know we can make it — just play to the whistle!' I remember seeing Werner Herzog talk after a screening at Telluride. Someone in the audience asked, 'What advice do you have for young filmmakers trying to make it today?' He said, 'Play contact sports.' I was ecstatic. Finally, somebody got it.

SF360: You ended up playing on the U.S. Women's Rugby team?

Micheli: Yes, briefly, but most of my serious rugby playing was done at the club level with the dominating national champs, the Berkeley All Blues <http://www.berkeleyallblues.com>. Can I just say this? Rugby isn't just about aggression — it really is the ultimate team sport. It takes so many different personality types, physical skills and body types, too. In so many sports, there's this psychotic body image for female athletes — people don't get it that female athletes have just as many eating disorders as runway models. So this is a great sport for women, because every type of physical make-up is needed and valued; it welcomes all the misfits out there. I mean you have tall, lanky women and these little tough plugs and everything in between.

[SF360 then digressed asking about "blood bins," "rucks," "scrums" and "mauls." Amanda answered every question and provided a diagram of a scrum, naming all the positions: flanker, hooker prop and more. Micheli herself was a flanker for most of her career.]

SF360: So what happened?

Micheli: Well, after three knee reconstructions, my future in rugby wasn't looking so bright. Right after I made the US team, I tore an ACL, and I was trying to come back in time to make the World Cup squad while working on my films at the same time. And then, within months of making my 'big comeback,' I tore the other ACL, and I was devastated. But, some part of me knew that it would be very hard to continue to pursue high-level rugby and filmmaking at the same time. I mean, I shot parts of 'Double Dare' on crutches! Not to mention, no matter how much heart I have as an athlete, at the end of the day, I'm probably better with a camera than a ball. But nobody wants to go out like that; it would have been nice to retire by my own choice but such is life. And now I've found other, more knee-and-career-friendly ways to get my sporting fix.

SF360: I saw *Cat Dancers*. It's an enigmatic story about the early days of big cat training, adagio, ménage à trios, and death.

Micheli: I guess you could say that.

SF360: Some of the subject matter was touchy. And, it seems like you must have followed and interviewed the main character, Ron Holiday, for quite a lot of time. He really opened up to the film. How does that work? How do you gain their trust? Do you need to like the person that is the focus of your film?

Micheli: I think you do on some level. I haven't filmed anyone yet that I couldn't relate to in some way. And, when you can empathize, it helps you to see what is engaging about the person you are recording. In essence, it's always a collaboration between you and your "subject" (as much as I hate that term), but at the same time, there's often some element of betrayal in the process.

SF360: How so?

Micheli: You are always wrestling with your subjects, gaining their trust and then exposing intimate details about them to strangers.

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