

For filmmaker Amanda Micheli, a crown of her own?

Delfin Vigil, Chronicle Staff Writer

Thursday, February 21, 2008



Amanda Micheli's life is a mess. In a good way.

The San Francisco documentary filmmaker is running about 45 minutes behind schedule on a day dedicated to errands that she knows won't all get done. Several long-lost friends and obscure family members are trying to get hold of her. But at the moment she is mostly terrified of not being able to find a dress that doesn't make her look like a certain garden tool.

Is she planning a wedding?

Close enough.

Her latest film, "La Corona," a documentary about a beauty pageant at a women's prison in Colombia, has been nominated for an Academy Award in the documentary short category. It already won honorable mention in short filmmaking at the Sundance Film Festival this year.

"I guess that means it's a good film, right? That's what really matters," says Micheli, with car keys clutched in hand and still catching her breath after running from a parking spot to the Atlas Cafe in the Mission District. "It's just so easy to get caught up in all the BS."

Micheli is not whining. She and Isabel Vega, her close friend and co-director of "La Corona," are constantly reminding each other that being nominated for an Academy Award is a good problem to have.

"The other day there was a luncheon for all of the nominees, and the invitation said informal attire. Apparently I was the only one who took that to heart," Micheli says with a look that suggests she won't make that mistake Sunday when the Oscars are held at the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles.

It wasn't the first time Micheli, 35, felt out of place in Los Angeles. She grew up outside of Boston, but her family moved to Venice Beach during her senior year in high school. Her classmates were children of Hollywood stars who felt sorry for Micheli because she rode a bike to school.

"I was the only kid who didn't have a car, but I'm like, 'Hey, it's OK. I live 2 miles away. It's all flat. I'm happy,' " she remembers. It was during that year when Micheli realized two things: that filmmaking was her love but that Los Angeles wasn't.

Micheli found a balance by moving back to Boston, where she studied documentary filmmaking at Harvard.

"I just wanted to tell stories with the camera," says Micheli, who, oh by the way, was also an All-American

MICHELIN®
TIRES

- Save on fuel
- Last longer
- Stop shorter

Find your tire now

MICHELIN
A better way forward

women's rugby player who later joined the U.S. women's team. She nearly played in the Women's Rugby World Cup until three ACL tears kept her from competing.

That Micheli went Harvard, was making a name for herself as an observational documentary filmmaker while still a student and spent her "spare time" carving out a career as a professional athlete makes Micheli blush. A little.

Like a true jock, when Micheli sees an opportunity, she tackles it.

That's what happened when Vega mentioned to Micheli that she'd read an article in USA Today about a beauty pageant at a women's prison in Colombia. "La Corona" took just over a year to complete.

"It was two months before the pageant. I thought, 'I've got a camera. We've got frequent-flier miles. Isabel is from Colombia. Let's jump on that horse and go make a film,' " says Micheli, who had previously spent eight years making "Double Dare," a documentary about stuntwomen in Hollywood.

Coming from a feminist background, Micheli was admittedly not a fan of beauty pageants. When she heard that the televised Miss Universe-type pageants were known to get higher ratings than World Cup soccer games, it seemed otherworldly and an irresistible topic.

"The whole thing about beauty in a prison is an irony in and of itself," Micheli says. "That's especially true when you have these girls like Maira, the assassin, who is pouting because she doesn't like her dress."

Micheli, Vega and sound recordist Tami Stepanek got inconsistent access to film contestants representing several cell blocks at one of the most notorious women's prisons in Bogotá.

Some days the warden gave the film crew a few hours to shoot. Other days they were lucky to get five minutes.

The 45-minute film documents the race to the crown (La Corona) and shows the drive of young women like Angela, an armed robber; Angie, a gang member; Viviana, a guerrilla terrorist; and the paramilitary assassin Maira, whose biggest fear is to lose the pageant, as she did the year before.

"This is a huge shot in the arm for their self-esteem," says Micheli. "It wasn't so much about their looks. They weren't focused on being pretty or skinny enough. It was more about just having something to do."

The film was shot in a strict observational and almost cinema verite format, with the crew filming contestants preparing dance routines, choosing dresses and deciding on hair and makeup styles with contributions from cellmates.

In part because the women were lonely, they opened up on camera and seemed comfortable with and trusting of the film crew. And the feeling was mutual.

When Micheli first envisioned a Colombian prison, she pictured a cold, dark, scary and intimidating facility.

"But the girls were all so young and cute, wearing street clothes, jewelry and makeup," says Micheli. "It was almost like a high school."

As the filmmakers found out, the reason the inmates don't wear uniforms is because the prison can't

afford them.

"What we immediately realized," says Stepanek, the sound recordist, "was that these women were safer in prison than outside of it."

Stepanek never felt endangered at the prison.

"Well, except for once," she says. "It was while I was running down a corridor to catch up with Amanda, and my microphone banged this one girl in the head. The girl ran up to me and started shaking her fist at my head. When she saw the fear in my face, she just smiled and let me go."

The film ends with the crowning of the winning contestant. But perhaps the real story is what happened to the winner after the film was completed and submitted to the academy. That's when Micheli heard that the winner had died just 10 months after being released from prison.

"She got a bullet wound to the back of the neck," says Micheli, who, because of academy rules, could not include the news in the film. "She was hanging with the wrong crowd, and a boyfriend or a john killed her. She was a single mom raising two kids. Couldn't find a job. It's all bittersweet. She'll never be able to see the film, and I know she would have loved it."

"La Corona" will air on HBO later this year. For more information on Amanda Micheli and her films, go to www.runawayfilms.com.

The oscars

-- See this Sunday's Pink section for your own Oscar ballot and follow along during the awards ceremony broadcast at 5 p.m. Sunday on ABC.

-- Pop Culture Critic Peter Hartlaub will blog during the broadcast, on the Culture Blog, at sfgate.com/blogs.

-- Please make the Oscars worth watching: A memo to the academy. **E4**

E-mail Delfin Vigil at dvigil@sfgate.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/02/21/DDG0V4LHV.DTL>

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

© 2008 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Contact](#)