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A LOOK AT THE WOMEN OF DERRING-DO
NEWTON NATIVE TURNS CAMERA ON STUNTWOMEN

BY DONNA GOODISON

Amanda Micheli always has been drawn to the pioneering woman. Cowgirls were her childhood heroines and the subject of her first documentary as a Harvard student.

In her second film, "Double Dare,," Micheli profiles Hollywood stuntwomen. The director and cinematographer chronicles the lives of Jeannie Epper and Zoe Bell, stunt doubles behind "Wonder Woman" Linda Carter in the 1970s and "Xena: Warrior Princess" (1995-2001).

"It's a unique perspective on women's experiences in a male-dominated industry," said Micheli, a Newton native now living in San Francisco. "For me, what Jeannie and Zoe experienced is kind of a metaphor for what a lot of women experience. It comes down to creating your own identities as a woman."

The movie opens May 13 at the Coolidge Corner Theatre in Brookline, and Micheli is scheduled to appear with Bell at the 5:30 p.m. showing on May 14.

Planning for "Double Dare" started in 1997. Producer Karen Johnson had seen Micheli's debut, "Just for the Ride," about rodeo cowgirls, and introduced her to Epper, then-president of the Stuntwomen's Association of Motion Pictures.

"I was smitten," Micheli said. "I just really was impressed by her resume. I was intrigued by these unknown blue-collar women in Hollywood who are contributing a huge amount of what you are seeing on screen but who you don't know anything about."

Epper, now 64, has worked on more than 100 films and television series, starting with the TV series "Maverick," which aired from 1957 to 1962. Her credits include "The Rockford Files," "The Bionic Woman," "Romancing the Stone," "Beverly Hills Cop: 3," "Blade," and "Kill Bill: Volume 2."

Epper recently wrapped work on Steven Spielberg's "War of the Worlds," due in theaters June 29, but she's still having trouble winning stunt coordinator jobs typically held by former stuntmen, according to Micheli.

"She's really trying to keep her career alive, despite the fact that it's really hard for older women in Hollywood, period not to mention a woman who has to fall down stairs for a living," Micheli said.

A New Zealander, Bell became actress Lucy Lawless's stunt double on the "Xena" TV series in 1998. Now 26, she also has doubled for Uma Thurman in both of Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill" movies and for Sharon Stone in last year's "Catwoman."

"Quentin is actually a huge supporter of the film," Micheli said. "It took a lot of perseverance on my part to get a meeting with him, but once we met face to face, he totally got what I was trying to do. Even though the set was closed to cameras, he let me on."

Tarantino also gave her feedback on a rough cut of the film and hosted a screening for potential investors at his home. But Hollywood otherwise wasn't very receptive to granting her access.

"It's a very highly controlled publicity machine in Hollywood, and they don't understand documentary film," said Micheli, who funded her film with grants, individual contributions, and a few maxed-out credit cards. "If you're calling from 'Entertainment Tonight,' they understand what that means."

The filming of "Double Dare" spanned five years and locations in Los Angeles, New Zealand, and China. The movie debuted at the American Film Institute Fest in 2003, winning the best documentary award. It then toured the festival circuit, and Micheli since has been working on distribution, which is being handled by Northampton-based Balcony Releasing, along with Capital Entertainment in California.

"Distribution is hell," Micheli said. "It's an uphill battle trying to get independent documentaries into the theaters."

Micheli saw documentary filmmaking as an obvious career choice. It combined her love of movies and documentary style still photography, which she developed as photo editor of Newton North High School's student newspaper. She shot and directed her first documentary, a road movie about her trip to the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in Texas, while studying filmmaking at Harvard's Department of

Visual and Environmental Studies. "Just for the Ride" aired on Public Broadcasting Service stations in 1996 and earned Micheli a student Academy Award.

When not working on her own projects, Micheli makes ends meet by freelancing as a cinematographer on other people's films. Over the course of making "Double Dare," she shot four feature-length documentaries and did some television work. She was director of photography for Jonathan Karsh's "My Flesh and Blood," winner of the documentary audience and directing awards at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival. She also recently shot an episode of "30 Days," an up-coming, documentary-style television series by Morgan Spurlock, director of "Super Size Me."

Micheli's next directing effort will feature Mackenzie Green, a female bounty hunter and bail bonds woman in San Francisco, who is in her 60s.

For now though, "Double Dare" is front and center. The film is booked in 12 cities and also will air on PBS's "Independent Lens" series on May 31 before its release on DVD.

"My hope is that it will reach a broad audience," Micheli said. "There's so much media out there, and there's so much trash, that as an independent filmmaker, you just hope your work will stick with people."

For more information about "Double Dare," visit the film's website at www.doubledarethemovie.com.