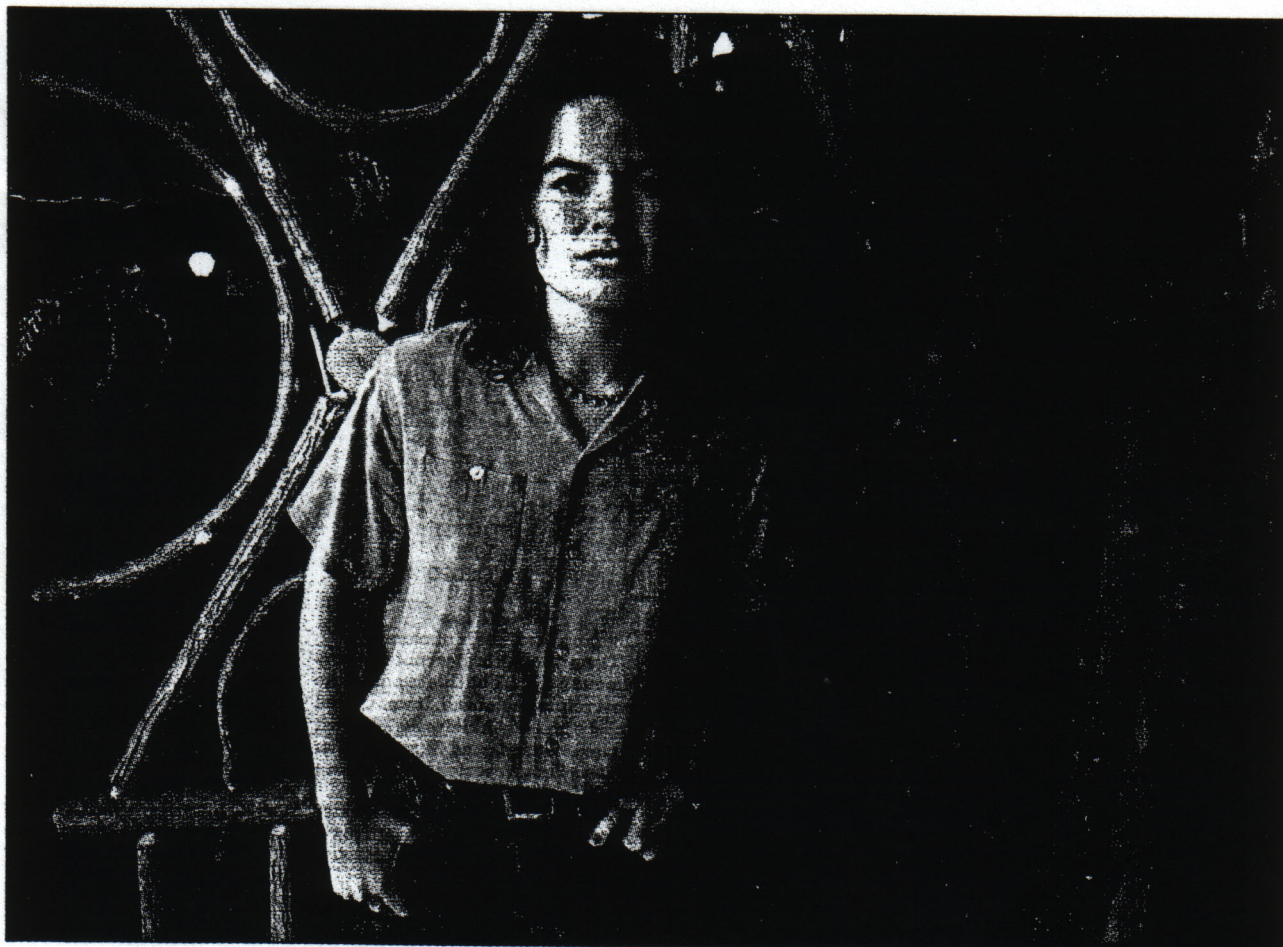


Even cowgirls get black and blue

S.F.'s Amanda Micheli got bruised and battered riding bucking broncos for documentary



EXAMINER / KURT ROGERS

Amanda Micheli spent three years making her first film, "Just for the Ride," picked from more than 600 entries to be broadcast on PBS.

By Jane Canahl
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

When you think about sacrifices made in the name of art, you probably think of painters toiling away in tiny garrets, musicians playing for nickels in the rain on the street. Doubtful you'd think about a filmmaker strapping herself to a bucking bronco that would like nothing better than to crush her skull beneath its pounding hooves.

But that is, in fact, what you do for art when you're: a) young; b) an ambitious documentarian; c) a little bit nuts. Amanda Miche-

li fits all three requirements.

"It's like grabbing ahold of a freight train. The toughest horses are the ones who twist and duck and go straight up in the air. They treat you like you're a flea on their back," laughs the 23-year-old, a horse enthusiast since her childhood outside Boston.

"I just figured since I was doing a film on cowgirls, I needed to try it myself. The hardest thing was learning how to land — I ended up face-first in the dirt most of the time."

A painful moment in an otherwise joyful voyage of self-discovery that Micheli turned into a little gem of a documentary, "Just for the Ride," airing Tuesday night on KQED at

11 p.m.

More remarkable than the considerable impact of the movie is that Micheli began making it when she was a mere 20 years old — a junior at Harvard studying theater and film. It is her first and only film so far, and was chosen from more than 600 entries to be broadcast nationally on PBS as part of the "Point of View" documentary series.

Is she something of a prodigy? No one is that together at her age.

"Who was together? That's called editing," chuckles the raven-haired, no-makeup beauty who currently works at Industrial Light &

[See COWGIRLS, D-7]

◆ COWGIRLS from D-1

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Magic and lives on Potrero Hill. "It's not like I had any concept of what I really wanted to accomplish."

Indeed, Micheli's journey began as a class assignment, and a vague one at that. "I asked if I could make a road movie — I had an idea about going to the Cowgirl Hall of Fame. They said sure. So I borrowed a camera, got a bunch of film from a friend, and we hit the road in my dad's car. Talk about unplanned."

Three years and many Western adventures later, Micheli had edited hundreds of hours of film. The idea she had originally, to do a piece on the Cowgirl Hall of Fame in Texas, was soon displaced when she met some unforgettable women — the best living cowgirls today.

Fern Sawyer: 'Lifeline'

"I met Fern Sawyer toward the end of the first trip, when I was really wondering about the direction the film was taking," remembers Micheli. "There she was, in her gold leather suit, carrying the flag in the rodeo. And I thought good, this woman is going to save my ass. I latched onto her like my lifeline. A lot of the other stuff went out the window then."

Sawyer, a flamboyant 76-year-old in spandex who had won every imaginable cowgirl prize, let Micheli stay in her home, providing some of the film's brightest moments.

Driving her Cadillac around her huge ranch, Sawyer tells Micheli, "I should have had a facelift a long time ago, but I'm not that vain. I was never good lookin' anyway, so I didn't bother about it."

Equally memorable is Jan Your-en, a mother of eight and grandmother of 38, who at 51 is consid-

ered the best female bronco rider of all time, winning the all-around prize in 1994 and '95, and who is leading in points this year. In one horrifying scene, she has helpers tape up her dislocated shoulder (with duct tape, no less), so she can take just one more ride during a competition.

Are they crazy? Micheli, who clearly follows the same call of the wild, says of course not.

"Like any other sport, these women are athletes, and they push themselves. The way Jan tells it, 'Most people I know have aches and pains all the time anyway, I might as well have a good time when I'm getting them.'"

Hooked on riding

It was in Youren's Idaho rodeo school that Micheli felt compelled to enroll. The plucky filmmaker makes a number of attempts, only to end up in a heap on the corral floor. But after that, she was hooked, and has now ridden in a couple of competitions.

"The most recent was in Anaheim. They kept warning me that this horse would come hard out of the chute. And that part was fine, but he smashed me against the fence. But I stayed on! I won 120 bucks, though — gas money."

In "Just for the Ride" Micheli offers an insightful view into the cowgirl existence, with historic photos and footage of the height of golden years of the 1940s, before "all-girl" rodeos were discontinued. The Women's Pro Rodeo Associa-

tion, as the organization is now called, is the oldest women's sports group in the country.

And like most women's sports, bronc riding is hugely short-changed. "Unlike male riders, these women have jobs during the week — they're ranchers, hairdressers. Then they ride on the weekends. There's no corporate backing for it. No sponsors."

Since moving to The City and getting a "bread-and-butter job" at ILM, Micheli says she hasn't yet found a place to ride. Doesn't George Lucas have horses? "Yeah, he does, but I'd be afraid to ride 'em! 'Amanda, you're fired!'"

Micheli is grateful for the backing she's gotten from Harvard and her parents, who were supportive despite their skepticism. "Yeah, my dad was always a little nervous about this artsy-fartsy thing. He's a surgeon, but he's also a third

generation Italian American who worked his way to the top. But they gave me loans, they lent me their car, but I think they were always wondering what the hell is she doing?"

The gamble seems to be paying off. Micheli has won a Student Academy Award for her film, and now it will be aired nationally. She wants to keep making independent films because "that's where you see the passion. Documentaries are labors of love."

And despite the fact that she's settled down (somewhat) to a Real Job, she plans to keep riding the rodeos when she gets the chance.

"There's a drive to keep challenging yourself. It's personal for everyone. It's why I had to try it. It's just a real extreme experience that takes you away from everything else in your life. For 10 seconds, nothing else matters."