



Ringmasters: Plotkin (LEFT) and Guidi, the force behind *Red Rain*, at King's Boxing Gym in Oakland.

shadow

LAURA PLOTKIN WANTED TO MAKE A FILM ABOUT THE LITTLE-KNOWN WORLD OF FEMALE FIGHTING.

WHEN THE PROJECTOR BROKE DOWN—TWICE—DURING THE WORLD PREMIERE OF *RED RAIN*, Laura Plotkin's unexpectedly touching tale of an abundantly tattooed, loud-mouthed lesbian boxer from San Leandro, Plotkin kept her cool. Less resilient directors might have crawled under a seat in the wake of such a mortifying technical glitch. But the Oakland filmmaker shrugged off the snafu at the documentary's debut at the Film Arts Festival of Independent Cinema in San Francisco last November. "Sorry about the projector," sassed the black-clad 35-year-old to the sold-out crowd at the Roxie. "It sucked. But it sucked worse for me."

Such stumbling blocks were par for the course during the two years it took Plotkin to make *Red Rain*. Hampered by a sometimes-reluctant subject—world champion boxer Gina "Boom Boom" Guidi—the fight-

er's protective family, controlling handlers, and a macho sports culture that didn't take too kindly to a gal hanging around ringside, Plotkin nonetheless persevered. In the end she crafted a compelling story despite limited access and—that perennial first-time filmmaker's problem—a lack of funds. "It's been difficult. There were lots of things working against me," says the Connecticut transplant, who's spent the past ten years behind the camera toiling on other people's

boxing

WORLD CHAMPION GINA "BOOM BOOM" GUIDI WAS HER TICKET IN. by Sarah Henry

films and music videos. "It's been a rite of passage, like birthing twins, and I've been in labor for two years."

It looks like Plotkin's persistence may pay off. *Red Rain*—boxing lingo for make it rain blood, go for broke—is getting noticed, and not only by the film-festival crowd. Roseanne Barr, a boxing enthusiast who just happened to answer her phone when the moviemaker called to talk up the documentary, got jazzed about the film after chatting with Plotkin for 45 minutes. Although nothing concrete came of the confab, Plotkin's promotional efforts have not been for naught: Folks at cable and public television stations have already expressed interest in the work.

The inspiration for a film about a female fighter

struck Plotkin a decade ago while she was working on a rap video at King's Boxing Gym in Oakland. Among the photos of pugilists lining the walls, one stuck with Plotkin: the heavily pierced, hairless black pate of Lady Tyger Trimier. "I had never seen anything like her before," recalls Plotkin. "She was strong and beautiful and awesome looking. She was very spirited, and I was moved by the picture. I was like, 'Who is that lady?' I didn't even know there was a whole circuit of female boxers."

Fast forward to 1996. Still keen to pursue the idea, Plotkin decided she'd have a better chance of meeting women fighters if she jumped into the ring herself. So she began learning how to spar at King's, a decidedly



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Guanti during a match at the Longshoremen's Hall in San Francisco, October 19, 1996. The fight ended in a draw.

low-rent establishment on a dead-end, trash-strewn street off the 880 freeway. A former warehouse, it's dimly lit and in need of a fresh coat of paint; a ring with tired-looking ropes dominates one corner, dated weight machines and faded fight posters occupy the rest. The gym—filled with mostly African American and Latino men—is thick with the sounds of exertion and the smell of sweat. Plotkin thought an idea would gel if she hung around long enough. And it did, in the form of Guanti, a working-class boxer with a lion's mane, a killer stare, and a soft spot for stray animals.

So began a careful dance between the square-shouldered, 150-pound pro fighter striving to win a world title and the pencil-thin, self-described neurotic filmmaker determined to bring her story to the screen.

When Plotkin first approached Guanti, she knew very little about the "Blonde Bomber." But the director made it clear she wasn't interested in a simple slam-bam saga for fistic aficionados. She wanted to present a behind-the-scenes account of a female fighter's life. Plotkin was also eager to explore why a woman would willingly traverse the male-dominated arena of professional boxing.

In Guanti, Plotkin found a complex character whose playful demeanor belies a troubled past. The film slowly unfolds to reveal the 36-year-old counter-puncher's dark side—drugs, alcohol, domestic violence—which she fesses up to in a refreshingly frank and self-pity-free fashion. Guanti's history (she's now sober and in a stable relationship) is nicely juxtaposed with scenes of her proudly pointing out pepper plants in

her garden or snuggling with her pet rabbit. "I was drawn to Gina's charisma as a person, her perseverance as a boxer, and her warrior spirit," Plotkin explains. "But I was also drawn to her struggle with herself, her dilemmas, and her demons."

Presented with such universal themes in the film, you begin to root for Guanti long before she steps into the ring for her world championship bout. Yes, it's an athlete-triumphs-over-adversity allegory, and yet the film avoids mawkish melodrama. Candid and frequently funny interviews with Guanti's family, trainer, fellow fighters, and team players go a long way toward keeping the documentary solidly grounded and real. When one of Guanti's assistants awkwardly attempts to address how menstruation might affect a boxer's ability, you can't help but giggle at his suggestion for the "problem": "Maybe there's some medication women can take to stop the flow," he offers naively.

It was this lighthearted touch that appealed to the board members of the Pacific Pioneer Fund, which awards small grants to benefit West Coast documentary filmmakers. The local group gave the Film Arts Foundation a check for Plotkin and *Red Rain* on the basis of a ten-minute trailer, says executive director Armin Rosencranz. And the film was made on a tiny budget: Plotkin landed \$12,000 in grants and spent three times that on her credit cards.

Although Guanti was initially keen to cooperate, her enthusiasm flagged over time. She admits now that there were days when she just didn't want Plotkin coming over to her house, poking around in her busi-



ness. She also had moments when she doubted the one-hour program would ever get finished. Guanti's reluctance posed a particular challenge for the filmmaker, but she eventually figured out how to keep her engaged. "Gina likes to see things," Plotkin says. "Once I started showing her cuts, she started knowing where I was coming from and came around more."

Plotkin didn't have to press too hard to get Guanti to discuss her substance abuse and violent relationships (she's been both perpetrator and victim). But it took almost the entire two years of filming for the fighter to talk on camera about being gay. Early in the shooting, Guanti's brothers discussed her sexuality on tape. Plotkin kept prodding her to open up, but Guanti was afraid her sexual orientation would affect her career. "I've always been out, and in a way boxing put me back in the closet," she explains one recent rainy day from the comfort of a couch in the rented bungalow she shares with her live-in lover, five dogs, a budgerigar, and a rabbit. "It was time for me to just get over it."

It's too soon to say whether Guanti's fears will be realized. Sexuality aside, she has a tough time finding female competitors; the brawny boxer has had only about a dozen pro fights and is still struggling to find a woman willing to contest her world championship title. But in classic Guanti style, she no longer cares if the boxing community knows she's gay. She's come clean and wants to move on. "It was important for me to let them know, 'Look, you guys saw me from the beginning to the world championship and nothing has changed,'" says Guanti, a mailroom manager for a San Francisco

advertising agency. "I'm still the same person."

Guanti's resistance to Plotkin's probing was just one of many snags the filmmaker ran up against. She had to negotiate her way through the sleazy underbelly of the small-time boxing scene. Guanti herself sniffs at what she takes home from the sport—a couple of thousand per fight—calling it fun money. But that didn't stop promoters from preying on Plotkin. "When you walk into a fight with a decent camera, people think you have money and they're going to ask for it," says the filmmaker, who often had to pay to shoot a fight. "I definitely got ripped off a few times." And she blew a substantial chunk of change on a trip to Las Vegas to shoot Guanti at a prizefight. Despite having secured an all-access pass allowing her to film ringside, Plotkin was kicked off by the referee, who offered no explanation beyond barking something about refusing to start until the "women crew" got down off the ring. "I went up there to get those close-up corner shots where the boxer is just pounding away—the beautiful stuff you're going to edit with—and I couldn't get it," she says. "I was pretty devastated."

She learned to live with the artistic constraints. "It's an interesting phenomenon when the creativity grows from the restrictions," she says. "I had to let something create itself almost. It's a different way to work." Plotkin describes her earlier, experimental student films as painterly, and she wanted a cinema verité feel for her first commercial feature. But she wound up with more talking heads than she'd bargained on. "When we put the first cut together I

was like: 'Oh my God. It looks like *Wide World of Sports*,'" she jokes. "*Red Rain* was a bit of a departure for me. I think it has its visual moments, but the content carries the story."

A newcomer to the Bay Area documentary scene, Plotkin is no stranger to the film biz. She's pretty much done it all: producing, directing, and shooting. Plotkin runs her own commercial casting agency, Real People Casting, finding talent for print and billboard advertising campaigns. While making *Red Rain*, she juggled her many responsibilities; on the day of the premiere she even cast an ad. Plotkin's currently the camerawoman on a TV documentary about Marvin Gaye and is on the lookout for her next project.

For now, though, she's keen to reap the benefits of her efforts on *Red Rain*. Plotkin is especially pleased that her first feature-length



documentary explores themes with particular resonance for women. Some might argue that there's nothing empowering about two women trying to knock each other's lights out, but such a perspective misses the point of the film, says Gail Silva, executive director of the Film Arts Foundation, which gave Plotkin completion money for the project. It's a testament to Guidi's coming into her own as a woman and as an athlete, says Silva. "She's overcome some tremendous difficulties, and she's had to work really hard," Silva says. "Her efforts should be celebrated and supported."

Plotkin agrees. "Women are very strong emotionally and spiritually, and we have great endurance," she says. "We're reared that way. We have great strength and power, but we're not trained to be gladiators in the physical realm in the way men are. So when a woman takes that on, her presence challenges every stereotype of what a woman is." ❧