



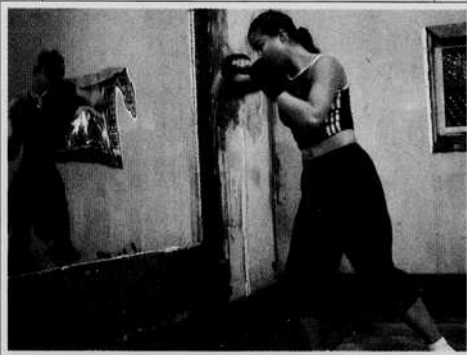
All You Need Is Glove

Newcomer MICHELLE RODRIGUEZ boxed herself into the starring role in *Girlfight*, a ring romance that doesn't pull any punches. BY GILLIAN FLYNN

TO LAND THE LEAD ROLE IN *Girlfight*, Michelle Rodriguez had to get punched in the face. The fledgling actress had been auditioning for the film's starring role for nearly a month when writer-director Karyn Kusama ordered her into the ring with a seasoned fighter. "The guy whacked me, and I flipped out," Rodriguez remembers. "I turned into an animal—I mean, who wouldn't? That's when she told me I had it."

Kusama's hesitancy is understandable. The 32-year-old NYU film school grad was embarking on her first feature film—an indie, yes, but with a decent \$1 million budget, thanks in part to some funding from her mentor, *Lone Star* director John Sayles (who can be spotted in a cameo as a science teacher). Kusama knew the casting of her female lead was a make-or-break proposition. She'd been searching for a female Marlon Brando to play the troubled Diana Guzman, a glowering teen from the Brooklyn projects who finds grace and confidence in the ring. Rodriguez, however, was far

from Strasberg-certified. *Girlfight* wouldn't just be her first starring part; it would be her first *speaking* part. The closest Rodriguez had come to acting was a year of extra work in films like *Summer of Sam* and *For the Love of the Game*. They weren't exactly break-



THE BOXER Rodriguez in a reflective mood

through performances. "You're lucky if you see my hair or the gum on my shoe," she says.

Still, Rodriguez, 22, radiated a scrappiness that snapped Kusama to attention when she strutted in—late—to a Manhattan-warehouse casting call of more than 350 women. "She

had a sort of fierce warrior spirit that you just don't see in many people, regardless of gender," Kusama says. "She really had it, and then some."

Good thing, because once Rodriguez got the part, she had to undergo four and a half months of intense training. Kusama insisted there'd be no clever, *Rocky*-esque choreography during the film's fight scenes; they'd have to be as real as cinematically possible. That meant a grueling four- to five-hour regimen five days a week: two miles of running, followed by rope-jumping, speed-bag work, and sparring, topped by sit-ups, push-ups, and weights. "I loved the training," says Rodriguez. "I ate it up and spit it out. The most difficult part was getting from Jersey City to Brooklyn every day. I hate sitting down for a long time, you know?"

Kusama, once an avid boxer herself, videotaped Rodriguez's fights so she could point out her weaknesses. By the end, Rodriguez's trainers at the famed Gleason's Gym announced she was on the path to professional pugilism. Kusama was satisfied.

While Rodriguez was studying the sweet science, she was also learning the ropes of acting. Kusama mandated that she watch *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Hustler*, and *A Woman Under the Influence*. Her more seasoned costars—Jaime Tirelli (*Carlito's Way*), who plays her trainer, and Paul Calderon (*Out of Sight*), who plays her father—offered occa-