

sional tips. And Santiago Douglas (*The Sopranos*), as a fellow boxer who becomes taken with this femme fighter, was particularly helpful during the film's sweeter scenes. "I was really intimidated by him because he just knew what he was doing," Rodriguez remembers. "But [we] clicked right away. That was a cool thing, because I had never really fallen in love with anybody, so it was hard for me to drag that out of personal experiences."

That's not to say Rodriguez's life has been short on adventure. Born to a Puerto Rican father and a Dominican mother, she lived in Texas until her parents divorced. At age 8, she relocated with her mother and an older brother to the Dominican Republic, where they stayed with Rodriguez's maternal grandmother. "I was living really lovely down there," she says. "We had a maid; we were pretty well off. I would look down outside my balcony, and it was complete, utter poverty. People walking the streets naked and stuff. At the time I was so young, it was just crazy for me to watch."

Then came time in Puerto Rico with her father, a teacher who passed away in 1997. When Rodriguez was 12, she returned to the States—to Jersey City, N.J.—where she tried to maintain a balance between her mother's strict beliefs as a Jehovah's Witness and her father's more cerebral ideals. "He was all about Sigmund Freud...Darwin, and Carl Jung," she says. "Complete, utter controversy—because when I got back [from visiting him, Mom] was all about God. But at 14, I liberated myself and started exploring the world more."



That "liberation" led to days spent hanging out in Manhattan's Washington Square Park, failing grades, and a stint in juvenile hall.

It also led to an aggressiveness intrinsic to making *Girlfight* work. "We needed to find somebody who really took to the sport and wasn't afraid to mess up their face," Kusama

says. "Among a lot of actors—I don't begrudge it at all—their face is their bread and butter, but I found there was resistance to what the role was: a boxer who really mixes it up. We had to have someone who didn't fear getting hurt—somebody who appears very comfortable with that risk. Michelle did."