

In the days before pay-per-view television, I stood in a crush of sozzled men in stonewashed, stretch jeans on a Sunday afternoon before a giant screen at Crown Casino watching Mike Tyson fight Evander Holyfield for the World Boxing Association heavyweight title.

I went mainly to see the women on the undercard – Christy Martin and Andrea DeShong. What I didn't expect to see in the main event was an act of cannibalism that left me gaping in utter disbelief.

A frustrated Tyson, losing the fight, bit a chunk off his opponent's ear and spat the flesh onto the canvas.

"He actually bit the guy's ear off?" I asked the guy next to me, who seemed as astonished as I was.

Holyfield began almost comically leaping in pain, his glove to his ear as the crowd in the casino booed and jeered at the screen and the ring was invaded, the whole scene descending into anarchy after only three rounds.

I had recently started boxing and I was confused by what I saw. The women had been excellent and inspiring. The men had been a disgrace. Tyson was surely a coward, a bully, an idiot and a madman! What kind of sport was I getting myself into?

Fifteen years later I am sitting alone in a room with him ... sort of.

In the intervening years women's groups have tried to keep Tyson out of the country because he is

a convicted rapist. He was banned from boxing after biting Holyfield and fined. He then made ill-considered comebacks, fell out with promoter Don King, went through an acrimonious divorce, lost \$400 million in prizemoney, was knocked out by Lennox Lewis, lost a daughter in a tragic accident, has been inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame, appeared in *The Hangover* and been the subject of a compelling documentary directed by James Toback.

Talk about a divided self. Tyson is now a vegan.

He was being beamed live from Las Vegas via a video conference and, for some reason, I was the only Melbourne journalist among rows of empty desks and bowls of lollies.

The others, all men, in New Zealand, Brisbane, Sydney and Adelaide, fired questions about Tyson's now 20-year-old rape conviction, his possible visa problems, how it felt being a superstar, how it felt being the youngest world champ. One even asked if he still had a tiger.

"Excuse me?" he said. "No, I don't got no damn pet tiger. I got no damn money, man. If I had some money I'd have a couple of tigers. You can't keep tigers for free."

It felt a bit like people poking a stick at a gorilla in a zoo to see what antics he would get up to while they were safe on the other side of the bars.

It is the quintessential image of human struggle not only against other people, masculine or otherwise, but one's own divided self.

Joyce Carol Oates, On Boxing

PROFILE

\ MISCHA MERZ talks to a new, more cuddly version of the former heavyweight boxing champion noted for biting off a chunk his opponent's ear and for his rape conviction.

THE TAMING OF

MIKE

TYSON

Tyson has been known to turn on his interrogators at press conferences, and even lurching at his opponents at weigh-ins throwing that notorious left hook.

Maybe the questions would have been different had we all been sharing air and within striking distance.

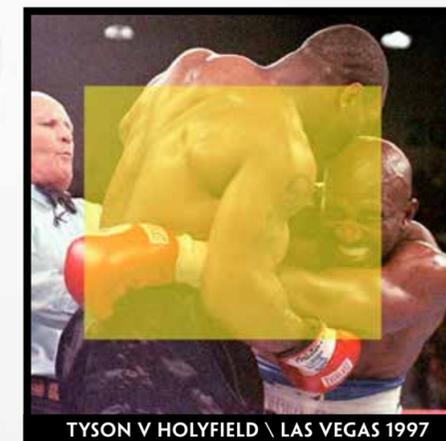
In November, Australians will get the chance to do just that as Iron Mike has reinvented himself, a bit like the Raging Bull, Jake LaMotta, as a story-teller.

In August he performed in a Spike Lee-directed Broadway show telling stories of his life in *Mike Tyson: The Undisputed Truth*. And now Max Markson is bringing the once "baddest man on the planet" on a speaking tour of Australia and NZ in *Day of the Champions*. He'll be in Melbourne on November 18.

But it's likely to be a safe encounter for all concerned. He reportedly reassured New York audiences that they would leave with both ears intact.

His Australian interrogators at the video conference still wanted him to be that dangerous and unhinged lunatic of the past. But they struggled. He is not only more reflective but also wary of being baited. It made for an awkward and erratic interview. Tyson, keen to stay off the ropes, was striking out defensively.

"I don't want to feel like I'm on trial to come to your country," he said after being asked about what he would



JEFF HAYNES / AFP / GETTY IMAGES)

say to authorities to convince them he was safe to let in.

"If I can't come, I can't come and that would be unfortunate ... what do you want me to say here? If you want to know that stuff you gotta come to the show, dude. It's about evolving as a person and reaching that paradigm shift in your life. There's not that much about my fights."

Then he said to no one in particular: "I can't believe they got me doing this shit."

Tyson was the youngest heavyweight world champion who, in the post-Ali era, reignited interest in and redefined the division. He was fast, explosive, exciting and hard to hit with a unique and very mobile style suited to his short stature. And dangerous!

He KOed people, early and often. But he was fuelled by a kind of rage that eventually turned against him.

Trying to offer some perspective, he said even he would have been scared of that former incarnation.

"Sometimes I look at films of myself and think what was that all about? What was happening? I think if I was alone in a room with that guy I'd be real nervous."

But he insists that at 46 years old, the ferocity button is permanently switched off.

"Everything's good now. Everyone in their life, for a moment in their life, goes crazy. Maybe that was my moment."

It was a pretty long moment though. Enough to fill a two-hour show, several books and films and many magazine profiles.

When it was my turn with Mike in the video hook-up, I revealed I was also a boxer, which had an instantly disarming effect. He asked me immediately what I weighed, a question all boxers ask each other, almost

like a handshake. I told him in kilos and he translated it into pounds.

I also told him that I had trained at Brooklyn's iconic Gleason's Gym and that my friends there had seen his show and told me it was great.

Suddenly I felt like Dian Fossey in *Gorillas in the Mist* reaching a hand out to the beast as he dropped his defences.

"You're the nicest interview I had," he declared.

"You're the nicest. I love you so much, thank you. I thought I had a jury before. I thought I was on trial."

I then asked him what he thought about the fact that the US boxing team's only gold medal had been won by a female, the 74-kilogram Claressa Shields, an African-American teen from Michigan whose father had been in and out of jail.

"Wasn't that brilliant," he said. "I thought it was awesome that the only one to win the medal was a woman and that rubbed in the face of all the chauvinistic pigs."

After all the accusations of misogyny levelled against him, was Iron Mike a feminist now as well as a vegan?

I was surprised to hear he was a supporter of women's boxing. "Well," he said, "I'm impressed with people who can do it at the best level in the world. That's what I support."

Tyson wouldn't be who he was without his trainer, the late Cus D'Amato. "If it weren't for that old Italian white guy," he once said, "I would've been a bum."

But D'Amato, both his trainer and guardian, died before he got a chance to see Tyson win the title.

I asked if, knowing the value of that relationship, and now that he is wiser, would he consider coaching young boxers himself?

"To be honest, and you being a fighter you would know this, other people wouldn't understand it. Me being a fighter doesn't mean I could be a good trainer. It takes a very, very, very special person to be a trainer. Once I'm your trainer I can't let you go, I'm like your father. I'm in your life. Am I really going to do that? I'm a little too selfish to do that. It takes a certain kind of person and there's very few people like that in the world."

D'Amato had kept Tyson, a child criminal with no father and a long police record, out of trouble.

"The best thing to ever happen in my life was to have met him. Man I couldn't imagine him not being in my life."

But his absence was as profound as his presence in Tyson's trajectory.

What would he say right now if he was alive?

"He would think I should still be fighting and be happy that I'm taking care of my kids and I'm being responsible to my family. He would be real happy."

Would Tyson ever fight again?

"No way," he said. "I'm not that person any more. If I was that person, I wouldn't have my family. There's no way a guy like that could exist with the lifestyle I live now. I would destroy my family. No way. I'm not that person. I'm cool."

At that point Markson told me I had run out of time.

"You're the freaking best," said Tyson. "The best."

Back when I witnessed "The Bite Fight", I never imagined I'd be bonding with the same savage creature I'd seen. Back then I hadn't yet fought and hadn't understood the pressures he must have been under.

I think about the famous Cus D'Amato quote that Tyson recounted in the James Toback film. "A hero and the coward both feel the same thing," he said, "but the hero uses his fear, projects it onto his opponent, while the coward runs. It's the same thing, fear, but it's what you do with it that matters."

Maybe after all these years, the lesson has sunk in. \ editorial@theweeklyreview.com.au

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