



MICK GATTO'S COMEBACK

MISCHA MERZ TAKES ON AN UNLIKELY SPARRING PARTNER.

FOR A SHORT TIME Melbourne's Underworld was a happy place, as much a haven for nefarious types as it was simply a gymnasium that ran twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. It was located in three tunnels or vaults in what was known as Banana Alley, next to Flinders Street station in central Melbourne. The vaults were once used for storing goods, most commonly bananas (hence the name). This odd relic sat on the northern side of the Yarra River opposite the ostentatious Crown Entertainment Complex with its hotels, shops and, of course, the casino with its hissing, gushing flame-balls attracting problem gamblers like sad little moths drawn from the outer suburbs in their droves.

The path along the river's northern side under the gloomy, disused Sandridge railway bridge near the Underworld was often frequented by Samoan teenage chromers who left a scattering of paint-stained plastic bags in their wake. It was also a favourite location for more traditional run-of-the-mill vagrants, hiding from the bright lights of the city to the north. A bearded pacer, wringing his hands as he walked, was a recurring motif. I even saw a young woman fellating her boyfriend beneath the dripping grey girders as I set out for a run one night.

Meanwhile the state government was trying to reinvent the area with as many harebrained but commercially viable schemes as it could muster, including the installation of a giant Ferris wheel like the London Eye, as the all-important Com-

monwealth Games approached. Mostly the ideas involved shops and cafes. Chromers and drunks and cowering teenage sex maniacs wouldn't do, apparently, for the world's most liveable city.

It was when they'd tried a more modest makeover about ten years earlier that a bunch of fitness fanatics and a few former *Gladiators* opened the Underworld. Very few businesses could cope with the regular and deafening rumble of trains overhead, so this new precinct was no place for a classy restaurant. A gym was ideal. Its neighbours included a heavy metal music shop, 'Metal Mayhem', a nightclub, a gay sauna, headquarters for river cruises, a newsagent warehouse and a karate dojo. Not surprisingly, the area lacked that special cafe latte buzz that developers hanker for. It was too utilitarian and, frankly, a little seedy. Outside, rats as fat as Rottweiler puppies scurried around the riverside plantings of ivy. The place had a life and rhythm all its own. Amazing, really, that such a milieu had sprung up so quickly and organically when the intention had clearly been something more salubrious.

The gym was run like a well-oiled machine by a man called Matt, a self-disciplined loner with a shaved head, whose motto, 'loyalty is my honour', was printed on the gym's black T-shirts with its skull and crossbones logo. He looked at first glance as if he would bite the heads off babies. He was so heavily tattooed that his Caucasian skin had turned

black in parts. His sporting interests involved anything to do with violent combat, his specialty having segued from Queensberry Rules to grappling and cage fighting. He liked to train with Rammstein playing at full volume. He had the kind of cold, million-mile stare that kept everything in check without him having to do much enforcement.

There was a time when I spent more hours in those Banana Alley vaults than anywhere else. I shared them with stockbrokers and lawyers at lunchtimes, and with strippers of both genders in the afternoons and evenings, as I devoted my life to boxing, trying to squeeze in as many fights as I could before my time was up.

My world was a swirl of running and punching and skipping and dancing around a ring with fists flying at me from a range of people so diverse they finally became a crazy kaleidoscope of bodies and faces. I shaped up to small and frightened secretaries, wild teenage boys, my husband, block-shaped body builders and anyone who was prepared to 'move around', as we say in the game. My nose was frequently bleeding in the shower and I strutted about with too many black eyes to count.

Then, in the late morning sometime in mid-2000, in the lull before the lunchtime rush, I met a rather intriguing group of men who, although none of us knew it then, were poised to undergo an extremely dire make-over of their own well-balanced world.

At first I guessed that they were trying to get fit for a particular event. Like, say, a bank robbery, because frankly they didn't look like people who worked nine to five. But, actually, I wasn't shooting quite high enough. Still, for weeks I asked myself, why would a group of middle-aged men start trying to get fit in the middle of the day when no-one was around unless it was to pull off some big heist? I was thinking of a scenario along the lines of the movie *Ocean's Eleven*, though with quite a few members missing.

What were they up to, this pod of former boxers who looked to be well into their forties? One of them was much older, but he didn't change out of his street gear and never raised a sweat. Sometimes he would sit on a bench while the others punched the bags, sweating and huffing and trying to ignite a dormant hunger. One of the men wore old leather boxing boots and stood in a southpaw stance and another had well-coiffed hair, an abundance of bling and a rough but

friendly old-school knockabout's manner.

But the one who stood out to me was a massive 6 foot 4 inches and twenty stone of tattooed flesh. He punched the heaviest bag so hard you almost took pity on it. The bell would sound the end of the round and the bag would swing and creak, and the mountainous man would walk away, sucking in the air. He was strong although not very fit. But he knew how to let his fists fly, that was for certain. By then I studied everyone I saw hit a punching bag and tried to discern their lineage from their technique. What I was looking at was a former heavyweight with championship aspirations who trained out of Kevin Watterson's gym in A'Beckett Street in the city sometime in the mid-1970s. Fighting name, the Italian Stallion. He along with his colleagues had been part of the golden era of *TV Ringside* when Ambrose Palmer trained the likes of Johnny Famechon at Festival Hall and when more than a thousand professional boxers plied their trade in Australia rather than the few hundred today. It was a time when boxers were like football stars and appeared on the front as well as the back page of the newspaper, dripping with championship belts and glamorous women. But there was much more to this man's story than a brief window of athletic notoriety.

In the eight or so years of my Underworld membership I had met many strange characters. Of course. It was that kind of place. And although it was never closed, the weirder patrons were not exclusively the nocturnal ones. Since I spent most of my time in the boxing area of the gym, my companions tended to be almost exclusively male. I met men who had killed other men and others who merely looked like they would. I knew men who most certainly bashed others either in the name of sport or in the name of work and others still who had robbed banks, had sold drugs, had done many years in jail. But, to borrow a line from Bob Dylan, "they never did like to talk about it all that much".

These types were diluted by the ordinary folk, the athletes and the weekend fun-runners, power lifters, body builders, anorexics and accountants with their personal trainers. The emphasis of the gym was fighting and strength. There was nothing blue chip or corporate about the place. It had an egalitarian flavour and a tolerant attitude, an important legacy of boxing culture. In the fight game, there is a tendency to take people at face value and dismiss

a whole range of crimes and misdemeanours. Once you step through the ropes, it seems, you are absolved of a certain amount of culpability. Courage or 'heart' comes before almost anything else. The rest, in a way, is none of anyone's business.

As the months passed, these men began to see that I was pretty much a permanent fixture in the boxing gym. It took a while longer for them to realise that I wasn't just doing it for fitness and fun, that I had already fought several times and had more fights lined up. And then eventually, by way of some mutual agreement, Mick Gatto's big heavy punches came flying at me, a woman who barely came up to his armpit.

I am probably one of the few people to have been punched by Mick and been happy to tell of it, aside from his genuine opponents, quite a number of whom actually out-pointed him, contrary to the myth of glory that grows in every former fighter's wake. Not that he ever tried to land more than a tap on me, although I can't say that was the case the other way around. I felt like a Jack Russell matched with a horse, slamming my little fists into his towering frame.

"Darl," he said one day, "whenever we spar you tend to look a little bit frightened."

I laughed. "Well," I said, "have you noticed how much bigger than me you are."

"But I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

He didn't know his own strength. To me, his half-hearted flicks seemed like potential sledgehammers flying through the air in my direction, though I was concerned more about minor miscalculations than violent intent.

I remember him letting me back him into a corner one day and saying, "Good one, darl, ya got me right in the beak," as I unloaded my pea-shooter punches on his massive frame, almost leaping into the air as I tried to reach his head. There is a strange trust and intimacy in the cooperation required for two people of disparate sizes to spar. I'd say men are rarely as cautious with each other. But when they are asked to hit women in public, they become excessively careful which, at least in Mick's case, was most welcome. Mick Gatto could have flattened me any time he wanted, make no mistake about that. I might have been the first person in his life he had ever sparred with in such a gentle way.

Finally, as we were warming up for one of our sessions, I asked him what he did for a living. It

seems impossible now for anyone not to know who Mick Gatto is. But at the time his profile was snugly below the radar.

"I work with unions," he said, a little haltingly, "you know, helping them work out problems, bit of industrial relations."

"Really?" I said.

He gave me a withering smile and returned to his warm-up.

When the bell went he asked me what I did.

"I work at the *Herald Sun*," I said.

"A journo?" he said and I nodded. "Well then, you should know me. They done a story on me a while back but it was all bullshit so I got them to do another one and straighten things out."

"Really?" I said, "I'll look it up in the library. What's your last name?"

"Gatto," he said.

I think I even had to write that down.

What I found was a couple of bizarre reports, the first of which alluded to someone with a boxing background having possibly murdered in 1988 a man, Giuseppe Arena, known as 'the friendly Godfather'. The second story, headlined "Boxer denies murder claim", was one in which Mick, the "former boxing star", outed himself as the accused person and then strongly denied responsibility for the murder, saying the victim had been a family friend. 'The friendly Godfather' had been shot dead in the driveway of his Bayswater home in an apparent gangland execution, back in the days when such events were somewhat of a rarity.

I could find only one photo of Mick in the electronic picture library. It was a partially obscured shot of him arriving at a kickboxing show with Rowena Allsop, who confessed to a reporter that she found Melbourne criminals good company and charming men, which would have been a fine thing to say if she weren't a bail justice. She also admitted to a friendship with the self-proclaimed 'Robert de Niro of Lygon Street', Alfonse Gangitano, who was shot dead in his own home in 1998.

I hadn't really been following the comings and goings. But Alfonse frequently came up in conversation with the middle-aged comeback kids. Mick and Alfonse had been pretty tight, apparently. Alfonse also had been the silent partner in the famous Barry Michael versus Lester Ellis IBF junior lightweight world title fight and had years later bashed the winner, Michael, over some unspecified issue.

One day Mick Gatto winked at me with his big jersey-cow eye as I stepped through the ropes and said, "Are you wearing lipstick today because you knew you were sparring me, darl?" And I guess then I knew a little of what Rowena meant. There was something about his size and his effortless charm and his soft rounded features and those eyes. They were the bright, friendly eyes of a *bon vivant*, not the cold eyes of a criminal. His salt and pepper hair, cropped close, made him look slightly distinguished. And he was a smiling, joking, easy-going, big, solid guy. Warm in the way that so many Italians can be.

Mick's former trainer, the now deceased (by natural causes) Kevin Watterson, also happened to be a key figure in Melbourne's illegal gambling and two-up schools. Mick and my trainer Sam traded stories about characters with names like Stretch Anderson and Kid Preston and Machine Gun Charlie, some of whom I have since met. And they recalled some of the sparring sessions at A'Beckett Street and the way a shelf held a collection of mouthguards that people grabbed at random when they wanted to mix it up. A rough old place it was, a space Quentin Tarantino might consider a perfect location.

The Underworld had its own health food deli and I would often join Mick and the older man, Ron Bonghetti, and the others for lunch. Mick was on a diet. He and the guys had walked Albert Park Lake in the morning and at lunchtime he would settle in for a massive plate of well-earned low fat chile con carne and rice, or a platter of fruit befitting a table of ten. He would either be on the Beverly Hills diet or the Zone diet, I can't remember now. Whatever it was, serving sizes were not an issue.

"It's not a diet, it's a lifestyle change," he would announce as he settled down in his designer, *aprs* gym gear, his mobile phone tinkling incessantly. Ron explained to me that his biggest weakness was for hamburgers at 2 am after a night of playing the pokies at the casino. They assured me that the casino had killed their traditional business, which had at one time been the illegal two-ups schools run by Nappie Ollington and Kevin Watterson and old Ron. Ron told me about historic shootouts with the cops and how he lived the high life after humble beginnings working at an abattoir in Sunshine. And he told me he had lost it all, too. But it didn't seem to matter considering who his mates were. I wasn't sure if Mick constituted a form of superannuation

for his old friend, since they were rarely apart.

"Fit little thing, aren't you," said Mick one day as I was warming up. He knew the work ethic of the fight game even if he couldn't live it. He said his boxing career didn't last long because he enjoyed the good life too much. How good? In the short time when he trained at the gym, I think I saw him drive three different late-model Mercedes Benz cars. The first one was powder blue with bone-coloured leather seats and a form guide sitting on the console. He wore a gold ring encrusted with diamonds in the shape of a dollar sign. Every molecule of him screamed appetite.

Over the next few years I thought of Janet Malcolm's book on journalistic ethics, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, more than a few times, and her premise that journalism is a dangerous dance of seduction and betrayal. Although I liked him and enjoyed the sheer incongruity of our association, I couldn't help wondering if and when Mick Gatto might come colliding with my professional life in a more awkward and problematic way.

By then I had passed the stage of chasing scoops and worked primarily as a sub-editor, writing the occasional feature when something captured my interest. I was more concerned with writing fiction and lengthier non-fiction than getting the quick and ephemeral fix from newspaper journalism. But still, I had this rather extraordinary association staring me in the face, and like a reformed alcoholic near booze, I got twitchy on the smell of a sexy yarn.

Whenever I went to the fights, Mick was at a ringside table with at least twenty other men who were always extremely well dressed. He would introduce me as his sparring partner and then talk up my skills in the ring like a proud uncle. He'd put his massive arm around my shoulder and we became an entertaining double act. The improbable pair of pugilists. There was a lot of kissing. Double cheek Italian kissing, whenever I was introduced to anyone. I revelled in the *Godfather* rituals and the rumours about how he plied his trade, which were tantalisingly non-specific.

Then the shootings started and my little gym anecdotes began to take on a whole new meaning.

I would go to work and start reading about people I'd met in those vaults as if they were characters in a TV drama, spoken of in tabloid terms like 'kingpin' and 'drug thug' and 'crime boss'. The really unpleasant ones I didn't know, or didn't think

I knew. But I would proof-read news pages and recognise the dead men as people I had sat next to at the boxing or chatted with in the gym. I would scroll through the now dozens of pictures taken of Mick Gatto as yet another coffin was carried down a flight of church steps and I would be able to spot, if not name, many in the crowd. Oh my God, I would whisper to myself as I recognised cheeks I had kissed now looking hollow with grief as their eyes plotted vengeance.

The last time I encountered Mick before all his own dramas began, sometime in 2003, I was actually inside the ropes of a boxing ring, appearing on the undercard of a \$150-a-seat IBF regional title fight at the Powerhouse at Albert Park. He, of course, was sitting at a ringside table with the usual crew and I remember looking down and seeing those velvety brown eyes glinting at me, and the big paw waving hello. I waved back with my red kid-leather Mexican fighting gloves.

At the Powerhouse, after the bout, he introduced me again as his sparring partner.

“She even gave me a shiner,” he said.

“No,” I said thinking how typical that these stories become exaggerated.

“You did,” said one of the Tonys, a willing corroborator. “I remember it.”

That was the first I’d heard of it. I later joked that I missed him at the gym.

“You should come back,” I said. “No-one’s been shot in ages.” There was a brief pause and, to my relief, the burly group chortled gaily.

It was only a few months later that Keith Moore, crime/investigative reporter-at-large, came trotting over to me at my station on the sub’s desk and announced in his up-beat Geordie accent, “Your mate Mick Gatto’s just shot some bloke at a restaurant in Carlton. Some bloke called Benji.”

I shrugged. “Benji?” I said. I’d never heard of him. And there I was thinking I knew them all.

The next time I saw Mick, he waved and smiled, looking up at me again, but this time it was from the dock of Supreme Court of Victoria Court 4 where, after fourteen months on remand, he was finally being tried on the charge of murdering Andrew ‘Benji’ Veniamin at La Porchella in Carlton on 23 March 2004. The figure waving to me was 40 kilos lighter, looking ten years younger and a little bit like the actor George Clooney. He seemed lanky, rather than large, and I could see for the first time how

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the Italian Stallion might have won his fights with range rather than pure power.

This was the first ‘gangland trial’ after the spate of shooting that had seen twenty-seven bodies hit the deck in the previous few years. And when he waved and smiled and said “Hello, darl, how are you?” I felt the familiar warmth immediately. I raised my thumbs and said, “You look fantastic”. I was in the public gallery. I didn’t want him to think I was there as anything other than a friend. But in the back of my mind, Janet Malcolm’s book taunted me. There’s a good story here, it murmured. And I looked down at the press benches and saw how many others thought so too and my heart beat a little faster. Whatever the verdict, the race would be on to get the big guy to talk. And the competitive little chaser in me started to twitch and plot even as I saw a human and ethical dilemma rearing up.

The well-documented trial ended in an acquittal and Mick exited the court like a rock star, hesitating briefly on the steps and taking in his first gulp of free air in more than a year. In the last month of the trial, he had commuted to town from Barwon Prison in the back of a dark van, shackled by the hands and feet. Tough for a man used to the opulent comfort of a top-of-the-line Merc.

On his release his faithful fans quickly fell upon him. There were whoops and hugs and a lot of vigorous kissing among the well-dressed and bejewelled family and friends who had stuck it out each day. A kind of exuberance surrounded him.

And then I watched as he became like any other paparazzi subject, his every move plotted as more of his lifelong friends got shot. He dodged and weaved and, wearing his dressing gown, threw eggs at photographers. He offered to sell his story and give the money to charity but there were no takers, for some reason. Each movement seemed to be monitored in the *Age*’s back page diary. Every now and then, there would be a big read on the whole tangled web of gangland activity by John ‘Sly’ Silvester or Keith Moore, illustrated by *Pulp Fiction*-style graphics of guys in suits and sunglasses, building my one-time sparring partner into a veritable cult figure. He was starting to overshadow Chopper Read as the media’s favourite dark prince. I watched it with a feeling of helpless anxiety.

In the weeks after he was released he started to pack on the kilos, too, nearly seven of them returned in a flash in the first week, as if they had been wait-

ing in the wings. I first called him as he was about to step on to a plane to the Gold Coast after a week of freedom. It was the first call in an ongoing series that exposed to me an aspect of myself that made me slightly uncomfortable. I was hovering somewhere between human being and newshound and I wasn’t sure which way to step. All of a sudden I felt like a little minnow needing, somehow, to swim near a much larger fish. It made me nervous and flustered when I spoke to him.

And over the following weeks, as more kilos went onto his frame, I made more calls, interrogating him about which reporters had approached him and what he had agreed to and hinting that his best choice, if he was wanting to talk, would be to me. No pressure, I kept insisting. And he would agree and make vague undertakings, referring frequently to our former sparring relationship as if it was an unbreakable bond. Seduction and betrayal, seduction and betrayal, whispered Janet Malcolm. But who was playing with whom here?

Meanwhile I thought about the heavy-hitting crime reporters who had been in court and had probably been cultivating Mick during all the shootings and probably from well before then too, when I didn’t even recognise his name.

The Commonwealth Games have come and gone and the once shabby area around the Yarra where I used to run has got ‘world class’ written all over it now. It’s all been smoothed over to fill in the cracks between Federation Square, Grollo’s Eureka Tower, Freshwater Place, the big architectural statements designed to scotch any notion of the city being small time. It all looks safe and clean and too well-lit for oral sex and illicit drugs and the comfortable contradictions contained in the Banana Alley vaults. The Underworld has become Shapes, a bland and conventional gym; the boxing ring dismantled, the walls painted an unappealing blue, the skull and crossbones logos erased forever. I think of all that has been lost to progress; a certain amount of the urban character of the city and a good many of Mick Gatto’s old and trusted friends as well. The agents of change are not always benevolent.

Some things, clearly, were just right the way they were.

Mischa Merz is a Melbourne writer and journalist. Her book *Bruising: A Journey Through Gender* was published by Picador in 2000 and short-listed for the Dobbie Award.