

feature

# Spar town

Former boxer **Mischa Merz** goes on a pilgrimage to Gleason's, the temple of boxing in the US, and mixes it with the fighting sisterhood

I WAS already over the hill when I walked up the steps of Brooklyn's famous Gleason's Gym, though I hadn't ruled out a sparring session or two.

But I'd heard some horror stories about sparring in America from Songul "Diamond" Oruc, one of the pioneers of women's boxing in Australia. She'd spent a few hard years in the late 1990s fighting in the US and warned me that sparring sessions were like territorial wars. She'd eventually wearied of the broken noses and the stress.

Gleason's, in a part of Brooklyn known as DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Brooklyn Overpass), once an industrial wasteland now rapidly being gentrified, is the oldest gym still operating in America.

Since it opened in 1937, it has been the location of 29 movies, including the Martin Scorsese classic *Raging Bull*, and home to the sport's luminaries, including Muhammad Ali, Jake La Motta, Mike Tyson and Zab Judah.

But the owner for the past 26 years, the urbane Bruce Silverglade, has managed not just to move with the times but also preserve something of the old-school boxing tradition. Though loft apartments are selling to Manhattan yuppies for millions, inside the gym a certain shabbiness has been preserved.

The layered fight posters, photos and magazine clippings tell the full story, but the electrifying energy of the place keeps you from looking at the walls long enough to piece together a narrative.

The more compelling story goes on from morning to night in four full-sized rings, with people shadow boxing, sparring and punching pads.

Aside from the sheer scale of this boxing mecca (more than 4500sq m), what surprised and excited me most was the number of women inside those rings.

And I mean women fighters, not boxercisers, not decorative side dishes to the main course, but genuine competitive athletes more skilled than most Australian male boxers.

Once that would have sounded like an affirmative-action overstatement. Now it's a simple fact.

I'm used to walking into a boxing gym and receiving a lot of sideways glances. I'm always acutely aware that I'm an oddity, like snow in the suburbs. At Gleason's I was noticeable more for my peculiar accent than my gender.

Women's boxing is bigger in the US than in Australia, but I really had no idea of the scale.

Silverglade, who sat at the top of the stairs at what looked like a props desk from *Hill Street Blues*, told me the gym had 300 female members and that 30 were active fighters. But it looked more than that to me. It looked as if women's boxing had reached critical mass and was now normal.

Since Silverglade sanctioned entry to women in 1986 it has become well known for its female champions, amateur and professional.

I had already made email contact before I arrived with Alicia Ashley, a Jamaican-born bantamweight world champion. I had watched her boxing on YouTube with giddy admiration. She

