

## Girls' stories, rough and real

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by Michael Fox

When Lexi Leban and Lidia Szajko started shooting a verité film about adolescent girls caught up in the San Francisco juvenile justice system, their avowed intent was to make a social issue documentary. More than four years later, as they prepare to premiere *Girl Trouble* this month at the San Francisco International Film Festival, the Bay Area filmmakers have plenty to say about the way society treats girls at risk. To their great credit, though, their documentary didn't turn out to be a polemic: It's a character study, plain and simple, in which real lives trump dogma, philosophy and public policy.

*Girl Trouble* follows four San Francisco girls with various hurdles to overcome. Shangra, a 16-year-old (when the film begins) charged with selling crack, is better off not living with her recovering-addict mother but has no place else to go. 16-year-old Stephanie is pregnant, entangled with an abusive boyfriend and dodging an arrest warrant issued after she ran away from a group home. (Sharp and feisty, Stephanie offers perhaps the best insight in the film: "Change is really hard. You didn't learn them old behaviors in one day and you ain't gonna change them in one day.") Sheila, 17, whose rap sheet includes selling and using drugs, grew up with a father and brothers who did stints in jail. As part of the girls' rehabilitation, they are all steered to the Center for Young Women's Development, run by 22-year-old (!) executive director (and single mom) Lateefah Simon.

"The things that attracted us to Shangra, Stephanie and Sheila were their personalities and survival skills, their wisdom about what the juvenile justice system is all about and their critique of it," Leban says. "But also they brought different issues into the film: They come from different ethnic backgrounds and they brought a diversity of family experience. One is dealing with domestic violence, another with drug abuse and the third homelessness. Their personal stories allowed us to hit on the reasons why girls find themselves in the juvenile justice system to begin with. The stories were representative if you went and did a story on 20 girls in the system."

The major problem with "casting" a verité documentary is that life is unpredictable, and some of the subjects the filmmakers originally targeted either disappeared or successfully dodged further trouble. Szajko mentions two women they were following for a while "who, because they were queer or bisexual, escaped some of the variables that impacted the other women—holding drugs or selling drugs or doing the other kind of things that can get girls locked up." Leban elaborates, "I think being a gay girl can be helpful in keeping you out of the system, by avoiding the entanglements of young men."

### Shooting in tight spaces

Although both Szajko and Leban had made numerous films and had substantial production experience—Szajko is chair of City College's Film Production department and Leban, who has an MFA in film production from S.F. State, is the department coordinator of the Digital Motion Picture program at Cogswell College—*Girl Trouble* marked both their first documentary feature and first digital video project. They began shooting with the first generation of DV cameras and commenced editing on Final Cut Pro Version 1.0. They ended up shooting 300 hours, which they pared down to a lean 72-minute film. "Without this technology, this film never would have happened," Leban declares. "We never could have shot it on our Bolex."

The lightweight, portable camera allowed the filmmakers to shoot unobtrusively in, among other places, courtrooms. Thanks to a blanket order signed by Judge Donna J. Hitchens, who presides over Juvenile Court, they had unprecedented access. However, they still needed to obtain permission from attorneys, the girls and other parties, and that wasn't always forthcoming. "Some girls didn't feel like being filmed in court on a given day," Szajko explains, alluding to the emotional burden of being an adolescent facing a judge for something far weightier than a speeding ticket.

Leban and Szajko had to omit countless sequences—and a few other young women—in order to condense four years into 72 minutes, and they're pained at the prospect of trimming another 15 minutes for the PBS broadcast. (In a perfect world, *Girl Trouble* would stretch as long as *Hoop Dreams*, even without the built-in drama of high school basketball games.) But they're cheered that the popularity of other new technologies—DVDs and Web sites—allows ways to reconfigure and release additional material. "We have a whole movie on teenage pregnancy," Szajko remarks wryly, noting that four of their original subjects were about to have babies as filming began. There's also plenty of dynamic footage of classes and meetings to compile a companion piece about the Center for Young Women's Development, which had its profile raised substantially with the awarding of a MacArthur "genius" grant to Lateefah Simon.

### **The other sopranos**

The filmmakers eschewed the use of a narrator, allowing their subjects to be heard without mediation. "A lot of times," Leban notes, "you're being talked at, at that age. To be given your own voice to tell your own story is empowering for other girls still in these situations." Szajko confirms, "In the brief screenings that we've had with youth, it's been really empowering for kids who share some of those experiences to see them represented on the screen, and for these young women to be given an opportunity to tell their own stories." Adds Leban, "There are a lot of people in schools in San Francisco who are homeless and don't know where they're going to sleep tonight. It's good for kids who aren't in trouble to have an awareness of them."

According to a title card included in *Girl Trouble*, girls now represent 28 percent of the U.S. juvenile detention population but receive only 2 percent of delinquency services. Leban and Szajko want that figure to increase—even though it's still attacking the symptom, not the illness. "We have a bigger question to ask," Leban says. "What happens before these girls get to be 12 or 13 and acting out? OK, the criminal justice system isn't addressing girls' needs, but we need to look at the problem in a holistic way: What about housing in safe environments? [Girls say,] 'The perpetrator against me got away with it, and I got punished. Where were you for me when all this other stuff was going on?'"

So, in the end do Shangra, Stephanie and Sheila straighten out their lives? "One of our biggest dreams," Leban confides, "would be that all three girls would be alive and not locked up when the film premieres, and able to come to the screening." Right now, it's looking good.

*Girl Trouble* screens April 24 at 7 p.m., April 26 at 1 p.m. and April 27 at 4:15 p.m., all at the AMC Kabuki 8 Theatres. For ticket info, visit [www.sffs.org](http://www.sffs.org).

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