

# *some real heat*



*a film by Stefanie Jordan*



462 Broadway, 5th Floor • New York, NY 10013  
Tel: 212-925-0606 • Fax: 212-925-2052

Email: [cinema@wmm.com](mailto:cinema@wmm.com) • <http://www.wmm.com>

A documentary about six female firefighters in San Francisco, about “chainsaw-mamas, good axe-moments, passion- and compassion-issues“ and about the myth and reality of a dangerous profession.

Directed and produced by: Stefanie Jordan  
Editing: Petra Volpe  
Camera: Sophie Constantinou, Stefanie Jordan  
Music: Robert Henke  
Sound mix: Robin Pohle  
Line producer: Marion Wildhaber

Additional Funding: Humanistische Omroep Stichting (HOS), NL  
DR TV, Denmark  
Womenartistsgrant of the Berlin Senate

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Nationality: Germany  
Length: 54 Min.  
Format: available on Beta SP

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**Hamburg Lesbian & Gay Film Festival - Audience Award  
Juliane-Bartel Award - Women's Media Award  
Hawaii International Film Festival  
Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival  
San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival  
Outfest - Los Angeles Lesbian and Gay Film Festival  
Inside Out - Toronto Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Fest  
Seattle Gay and Lesbian Film Festival  
Portland Gay and Lesbian Film Festival  
Tampa Gay and Lesbian Film Festival  
Austin Gay and Lesbian Film Festival  
Fresno Reel Pride Film Festival  
Michigan Reel Pride Film Festival  
Seoul Women's Film Festival  
Documentary Fortnight, Museum of Modern Art, New York**



Stefanie Jordans' films have been shown at festivals world-wide and have won numerous awards including the Silver Bear for best short film (LATE AT NIGHT; 4'20 animation) at the International Berlin Film Festival 1997. Up until now she has made animation- and experimental films as well as commercials. SOME REAL HEAT is her first documentary. Besides being a film- and videomaker she has worked as a graphic designer and as a camerawoman. Her film works are extensively explored in Alice Kuzniar's book „The Queer German Cinema“, Stanford University Press 2000

### Films and Videos

- 2001 "SOME REAL HEAT", documentary, Digi-Beta, col., 54 min.
- 1997 "LATE AT NIGHT", animation, 35mm, col., 4:20 min.  
Official Competition, International Berlin Film Festival 1997, Silver Bear
- 1996 "CRUDE", experimental documentation, Beta, b/w, 5min.
- 1995 "MAYDAY", animation, 16mm. col., 2 min.
- 1993 „JESSES MARIA“, experimental film, Beta, col., 4 min.
- 1990 "A FEW FAST FRAMES", experimental film, S8 on Beta, col., 8 min.

### Commercial Work

- 2000 3 commercials for cinematic release for DerHörVerlag, Munich, Bücher.de, Hamburg and Meyersche Buchhandlung, Cologne, Germany, 35 mm, col., 25 sec, Dolby Stereo
- 1999 „Headspace“, commercial for cinematic release for DerHörVerlag Publishing and Hugendubel Books, Germany, 35 mm, col., 25 sec., Dolby Stereo
- 1997 "Moscowspot" for 850-Year Celebration of the city of Moscow, 35mm, col., 0:30 min., commissioned by EGI Corporation, Moscow

### Camera Work

- 1998 „SCHWARZES WASSER“, D: Nathalie Percillier, Short Film, Beta, col., 8 min.  
(Panorama, International Berlin Film Festival 1998)
- 1997 „MARIOLLA BRILLOWSKA“ from the series "Womenartistportraits"  
D: Lily Besilly, Beta, col., 5 min.
- 1997 "HEROINES OF LOVE" D: Lily Besilly / Nathalie Percillier, Short Film, 16mm, col., 13 min. (Panorama, International Berlin Film Festival 97 - Gay Teddy Award)
- 1990 „OILSPILL“ R: Amy Klitsner, USA, Commercial Documentation, Beta, col., 20 min.

### Awards (a selection)

- "SILVER BEAR" for Short Film, International Berlin Filmfestival 1997 (for "LATE AT NIGHT")
- Prädikat „besonders wertvoll“ (for "LATE AT NIGHT")
- Animation Award „Crystal Mirror“/ Internat. Women`s Filmfestival Minsk / Belarus
- FEMIC Award / Italy (for "LATE AT NIGHT")
- Special Award of the City of Montecatini Terme / Italy (for "LATE AT NIGHT")
- Special Mention / 33rd Chicago International Film Festival (for "LATE AT NIGHT")
- Bronze Plaque / Columbus International Film & Video Festival (for "LATE AT NIGHT")
- 2. Prize in the Animation Category / UFVA Student Film & Video Festival, USA (for "MAYDAY")
- Teddy Award - Panorama, International Berlin Film Festival 97 (for "HEROINES OF LOVE")

## **Women in Firefighting- from past to present**

*“The honour of being the first known woman firefighter goes to an older African-American woman named Molly Williams. She was a slave owned by a member (=firefighter) of Oceanus Engine Company #11 in New York City.”*

*(quoted from “Women in Firefighting: A History“)*

Not until 1974 were women officially permitted to work at U.S fire departments. The road leading up to this point and the time since have been difficult. It was not just that the profession of firefighting was restricted to men, in reality it was the exclusive domain of white men. Racist convictions were habitual among firefighters, who were even brought in to hose down demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement in the Sixties. Opening up the department to other social groups progressed step by step, and was a major cause of disagreement and friction. In 1970 there were still only 4 Black men in the S.F. brigade and women were not even permitted to write the entrance exams until 1976. It was not until 1987 that the first 7 women were hired, making the SFFD the last major urban fire department to include women. The department and firefighter’s union fought to the bitter end, even resorting to the courts in their efforts to keep it a purely male domain. The precursor to this court case was the enactment of the Consent Decree Law, which made the employment and promotion of women and members of minorities a legally binding requirement. This law was recently repealed when the quotas (40 % people of color and 11% women) were met.

The first 7 women entered the SFFD in 1987.

Currently the number of women in the department has grown to 212 representing 11.6% of the workforce. That leaves 1622 males for a total of 1834 uniformed personnel.

The state of California has the highest percentage of women firefighters worldwide.

## **Firefighter’s special role in San Francisco**

In a city built mainly from wood firefighters have always played a special role in the community. In 1906 it was not the big earthquake that destroyed the city but the big fire following the quake. It lasted three days and destroyed twenty-eight thousand buildings - including twenty firestations.

In comparison to the blue-collar image of firefighting for example in Germany, the status of the fire brigade in San Francisco is defined by its public visibility, community involvement, charity work and by economic status (U.S. American firefighters earn significantly more than most of their European colleagues).

## What do firefighters actually do?

**Film-text:** nowadays the fire department's work consists of:  
**80% medical calls**  
**20% fire-related calls**



The fire brigade personnel tackle fires far less often than myth would suggest. Due to better fire prevention the number of fires has decreased significantly over the last decade.

They are more often called upon for medical emergencies, such as giving first aid in the case of a sudden heart attack, or when someone has an epileptic fit.

But also accidents, floods, shootings, cats stuck in trees, and even the occasional birth all belong to their everyday work.

*“Medical calls are fast becoming the most common calls that San Francisco firefighters respond to. This is a city guarded by forty-one firestations. Fire stations are three minutes from any emergency in the city. On the other hand, there are usually only fourteen ambulances on the streets at any one time. At night this can drop to seven. At times an ambulance cannot arrive for twenty minutes. It is the firefighter’s job to keep the patient alive until the paramedics come.”*  
(quoted from “Fighting Fire-a personal story“ by Caroline Paul)

## Training

To prepare firefighters for this task Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) Training has become part of the Fire Academy’s training schedule. In the 14 months of schooling they are taught in all the theoretical and hands-on aspects of firefighting.

After graduating from the Fire Academy firefighters go out into the field, taking up a so-called “Probationary Spot“ in a crew. During the following year their more experienced colleagues teach them the actual routine in depth.

This old system is the root of further friction. There have been numerous complaints about male colleagues refusing to pass on their knowledge to female probationaries. The women complain that this form of subtle resistance weakens the team on which all depends and (therefore) jeopardizes everybody’s safety.

## Firestation life

In a 24-hour period at the station, the alarm - lovingly called "bee-bop" - goes off on average from 3 to eight times, depending on the location of the station.

The average working day consists of only a few hours of actual intense crisis work. The rest of the time the firefighters maintain equipment or wait, passing the time with cooking, eating, watching TV, talking, reading, learning, cleaning, sleeping or whatever else they like to do.

**Film-text:** the station or 'house' is a communal space  
where all daily duties are shared.  
each shift lasts 24 hours.

Firefighters work nine 24-hour work-shifts a month, with 2-5 day breaks between shifts.

## Gear, Tools and Tradition

**Film-text:** firefighters have an average of 300 different tools to work with. Their fire gear - helmet, coat, scott-airpack and boots – weighs approximately 100 lbs.

The SFFD has a very strong sense of tradition. This might be the reason for the ongoing use of almost old-fashioned equipment and gear, like leather-coated helmets with metal eagle decoration. The majority of S.F. firefighters still choose a helmet that weighs twice as much over one of the newly introduced lighter synthetic ones. Most of the ladders in use are (still) made from wood and it takes six firefighters to raise the biggest one, which is fifty feet long.

## The Women - additional info

Assistant Deputy Chief **Khairul Ali**

is currently the highest ranking African-American Officer in the SFFD.

She has been in the department 12 1/2 years and was one of the first African-American firewomen to be trained for this job. In her first years on the job she challenged the department more than once on issues of discrimination, going to court once to fight her case. Before her most recent promotion she worked as a captain with an all women's crew at Station 40. She is 43 yrs. and is the mother of 2 and grandmother of one child.

Firefighter / Paramedic **Constance Sanders**,

is 34, married and has been in the department since July 1997.

Before applying to the SFFD she had been a soldier in the U.S. Army for a few years.

Having also worked as a lifeguard before, she is now part of the special Surf Rescue Unit that gets called for rescues in the nearby ocean. She has just recently acquired her paramedic certificate.

She says that her husband was her biggest supporter, when she decided to join the department.

She holds a degree in English literature.



Firefighter / Paramedic **Heather Buren**

has an experience of 3 1/2 years in the SFFD department and is 30 years old

Like Constance Sanders she is just finishing her training as a paramedic. This will secure her a spot on an engine crew as the "Firefighter medic" which means to take the lead in any medical call. Fighting fires is still what she likes most though and she admits that it's "the edge" she likes to go to, but also the "group feeling of putting it out together" that makes this part of the job her favorite. She acquired a lot of her excellent tool skills in her former job when she worked as a supervisor for the Oakland Conservation Corps.

Firefighter / Lieutenant **Anita Paratley**

44, has been a San Francisco firefighter for the last 12 years and - already going out as a lieutenant - is currently taking the last promotional exams. After earning a college degree in sociology and psychology in the 70's, she worked in the field of mental health for a few years. But she aspired for more physical work and became a truck driver. Since "...Social work wasn't physical enough, yet truck driving wasn't emotional enough..." firefighting became the ideal answer to her quest for the perfect career.

She was featured in the national women's firefighter calendar in 1999.

Firefighter / chief's operator **Alison Greene**

is 40 and entered the Fire department 8 years ago.

Four of those years, she worked at station 40 in an all women crew under captain Khairul Ali. She used to enjoy driving the big truck at high speed up and down the city's steep hills, but is now working as an

operator assisting the batallion chief. She is on the steering committee of the Women in Fireservice Union S.F. and has found her passion in voluntary work with troubled female youth, guiding them through firefighter training routines to boost their self-image.

In her spare time she also enjoys learning about the stock market.

Her partner is also a female firefighter.

Retired firefighter / burn-counselor *Mel Stapper* had been a firefighter for only about half a year when her crew got called to a small fire which turned into one of San Francisco's legendary blazes. Her captain died on the scene and she suffered third degree burns on her whole body, burnt lungs, brain damage and an eye injury. She miraculously woke up from a three-month coma when doctors had just given up hope that she would ever awake again. Even though she'll never again be able to do her job, she still sees herself as a firefighter. She is now counseling burn survivors and their families whenever possible, dealing with the less physical and glamorous side of this profession. She has retired to the countryside.



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"Social Worker with an Ax"

Stefanie Jordan's Some Real Heat: A Documentary on Women Firefighters

Early on in this 54-minute documentary, women firefighters from San Francisco talk about their favorite gadget--the ax, the chainsaw, or the huge "tool truck" itself. They speak of their sensual relationship to these instruments, about how they handle. Unbelievably strong and big, these women are incredibly sexy, whether on the job in their 100-pound firefighting gear, lifting weights at the gym, or heading off to surf in a wetsuit on a day off work. But in addition to displaying their physical strength, the women interviewed also speak eloquently about other aspects of their profession, one that asks of them not just to hack down doors with an ax but to be compassionate social workers as well. They address such topics as being present at the privileged moment of another's death, how to express vulnerability and fear, and how to deal with public perception of women in a "man's job."

With the first woman joining the San Francisco Fire Department only in 1987, women now comprise 13% of that city's force, the largest ratio in the country. Despite such progress, these women still face an uphill battle. As if putting out fires weren't difficult enough, they also have to cope with a lot of hostility. If firefighters, especially in the aftermath of September 11th, represent the quintessential American hero and men respect and covet this profession like no other, then men are not going to want to see women, especially black women, in it. Even in the fire department itself there is the myth that women can't do the job. So it is a real advancement for all women when, as one of the interviewees narrates, at a Halloween school party three of the girls are dressed as firefighters. In their vigor and courage, these women serve as fantastic role models for young and old girls everywhere.

In fact, now that they are eager to hear more about the all-American firefighter, school kids across the country should watch Some Real Heat, precisely because of and not despite its feminist verve. Especially if one considers feminism to be superfluous today, this documentary makes one rethink still ingrained sexist assumptions about what professions women can enter.

Some Real Heat is the longest film to date by director Stefanie Jordan. Her earlier work includes two gorgeously shot black-and-white shorts, Me and Mrs. Jones (1994), where she stars with co-director Claudia Zoller, and Crude (1996) on the leather crowd's Folsom Street Fair in San Francisco. The animated film Late at Night (1997), co-directed with Zoller and Stefanie Saghri, won the coveted Silver Bear Award at the 1997 Berlinale. Set to Cassandra Wilson's song Children of the Night, this breathlessly movemented animation, like Jordan's other films, shows women out on city streets. Here the androgynous figure strides along alone at night, while shadows billow around her. Eerie lamplight illuminates her like a halo. Some Real Heat likewise has a keen eye for the beauty of nocturnal city streets. This time, the hypnotic electronic score by Robert Henke punctuates the visuals. But don't expect a TV live-action-drama like Cops. Some Real Heat doesn't show any dramatic rescues, gruesome scenes, or pyrotechnic feats. It resists sensationalizing or glamorizing the deeds of the firefighters. Instead, we leave the theater with some real respect for these bold women.



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