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### **GIRL WITH GUN**

Russem Productions

*by Jason Pankoke*

This sophomore film short from Los Angeles director Russ Emanuel has been kicking butt on the critics-and-film-festival circuit for the past year, receiving kudos from seemingly all corners of planet Earth. I can understand the general appeal now that I've seen **GIRL WITH GUN**, which neatly appropriates the archetypal "superhero-by-night" conflict for its platinum-blonde heroine, Gwen Hunter (Tracy O'Connor), who by necessity must balance her unusual profession with a "normal" existence without one upsetting the other. Not unlike a certain mild-mannered news reporter, Gwen demonstrates a charming awkwardness in domestic situations as when she visits her pregnant pal Mitzi (Michelle Martin) or dines with easy-going boyfriend Dan (Erick Holloway), yet when the gloves fly off in the presence of a drug dealer (Matteo Ribaud), ninja (Michelle Lee), or Mafioso (David Neff), she's all highly-trained, muscle-toned business. Her ongoing effort to help the innocent does come in a dubious guise – that of a leather-clad assassin-for-hire, not a Technicolor protector.

To the credit of Emanuel, scriptwriter Emile Haris, and first-time film actress O'Connor, Gwen is a sprightly human presence in this maelström. We like her, we want to learn what makes her tick, and we cringe when things don't quite turn out her way. **GIRL WITH GUN** likewise favors its character moments across the board, resulting in a stripped-down approach that is welcome in this age of burdensome CGI comic-book visuals. At times, it resembles a televised drama more than theatrical cinema – intimate camera compositions slowly move around the action as people think, talk, and ponder, while the opening resembles a fade-in from a commercial break and the closer cries out for "To Be Continued" to be stamped upon its letterbox frame. Only Gwen's skirmish with the ninja behind a Thai restaurant (?) generates excitement in the contemporary action-movie mold, although the too-tight compositions suggest the masking of inadequate stunt-fighting.



The **GIRL WITH GUN** screenplay seems to crop out a little too much story arc and character motivation as well. For instance, does Gwen's dangerous moonlighting as "The Nightingale" raise conflicting emotions and priorities within her, *a la* Bruce Wayne, that amount to more than puppy-dog gazes directed at Dan or maternal pangs every time she thinks about Mitzi's family unit? What do her friends believe she actually does for a living, and how will Gwen hide the truth? Also, who employs her to take out these underworld skuzzballs, and why? I can happily vouch for the short's technical proficiency, serviceable acting, and potentially compelling concept, but the lack of narrative depth is puzzling to me since well-crafted dialogue and plot points cost much less than visual flourish.

Ten years ago, an equivalent to **GIRL WITH GUN** would have entertained me without question. (Of course, 10 years ago this month, **BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER** made its network television debut and significantly raised critical expectations in this loose subgenre.) Today, I can admire Russem Productions' low-budget achievement to a degree, but my personal enjoyment is compromised because it is obviously designed to impress industry contacts as well as general audiences – it *is* commercial and serves *as* a commercial for its makers. Even then, I'd rate **GWG** a PG for "Pretty Good" and an EOE for "Equal Opportunity Employees" in case any of you studio suits would like to court the talent-clad artists-for-hire involved here.



## **GIRL WITH GUN**

A Russem Productions film

2006, 24p, Color, 15 minutes

*Directed by Russ Emanuel*

*Produced by Russ Emanuel, Emile Harris, and Lisa O'Dell*

*Written by Emile Haris*

*Starring Tracy O'Connor, Michelle Martin, Erick Holloway, Michelle Lee, Matteo Ribaldo, David Neff*

Previewed on DVD

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