

- [MICRO-FILM News Blog](#)
- [C-U Blogfidential](#)
- [MICRO-FILM Home Page](#)
- [Contact](#)

[Review - OZONE](#)

[Review - GIRL WITH GUN](#)

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

[Russem Productions](#)

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