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Interview Russ Emanuel

Russell "Russ" Emanuel is an award-winning American director, producer, and independent filmmaker, having directed such actors as John Heard, Robert Picardo, Vincent Pastore, Glynnis O'Connor, Hallie Kate Eisenberg, Jeremy London, Ryan Hurst, William Devane, Marina Sirtis, Sean Kenney, Armin Shimerman, and Gary Graham. Originally from San Francisco, he grew up in both Japan and the United States, garnering an international viewpoint of the world throughout his childhood. After graduating from the University of Southern California to study Cinema-Television, he founded Russem Productions in 2002 in order to promote his short films including GIRL WITH GUN (2005) and documentary RESTORATION OF PARADISE (2014), as well as current films COLLAR (2017), THE ASSASSIN'S APPRENTICE (2018), and THE ASSASSIN'S APPRENTICE II (2021). Presently, WISPER (2020) marks Emanuel's fifth foray into feature filmmaking, after having directed P.J. (2007), CHASING THE GREEN (2009), THE LEGENDS OF NETHIAH (2012), and OCCUPANTS (2015).

1. Can you provide us with an overview of your background as a filmmaker and some of the notable projects you've been involved in?

Hi, my name is Russ Emanuel, and I'm an award-winning American director, producer, and independent filmmaker, having directed such name actors as John Heard, Robert Picardo, Vincent Pastore, Glynnis O'Connor, Hallie Kate Eisenberg, Jeremy London, Ryan Hurst, William Devane, Marina Sirtis, Sean Kenney, Armin Shimerman, and Gary Graham. I grew up in both Japan and the United States and graduated from U.S.C. to study Cinema-Television. I founded Russem Productions in 2002 to promote my films including GIRL WITH GUN (2005) and documentary RESTORATION OF PARADISE (2014). Currently, STAYCATION (2024), which is in post-production, marks my sixth foray into feature filmmaking, after directing P.J. (2007), CHASING THE GREEN (2009), THE LEGENDS OF NETHIAH (2012), OCCUPANTS (2015), and WISPER (2020). I also directed two action films THE ASSASSIN'S APPRENTICE and THE ASSASSIN'S APPRENTICE 2 and we are currently planning on a part three.

2. Your film "Occupants" employed a unique narrative perspective. How did you approach crafting this distinct storytelling style, and what creative decisions did you make to enhance the viewer's experience?

I worked closely with the writer Julia Camara, producer Howard Nash, and the director of photography, the late Emile Haris, to come up with a plan on how to film. For example, filming of the prime and parallel universes with the same camera angles required us to think where to put the camera and to place them in the exact same place when we finished filming the prime universe first (the first 7 shoot days), before switching to the parallel universe (the last 3 shoot days).

3. What inspired the storyline of "Occupants," and how did you develop the concept of parallel versions of the main characters?

It was the writer Julia Camara who came up with the idea while on a flight to her native Brazil. I exatrolated on her script and came up with my own ideas as a director, for example about the Case studies seen in the film from the Peterson Research Institute. The producer Howard Nash also came up with the idea of setting of the fire scene at the end of the film.

4. "Occupants" has been praised for its innovative storytelling and engaging characters. Can you discuss the collaborative process behind bringing this vision to life?

It was a group effort with all cast and crew. It began with the script by Julia Camara. Then I worked closely with the director of photography Emile Haris who also was the editor to come up with a game plan on how to shoot both the prime and parallel universes in 10 shoot days. I then worked with my brilliant actors Briana White (who plays Annie and Parallel Annie Curtis), Michael Pugliese (who plays Neil and Parallel

Neil Curtis), and Robert Picardo (of STAR TREK fame, who plays Dr. Alan Peterson of the Peterson Research Institute). I also worked with other crew including production designer Tatiana Kuilanoff, costume designer Nina Minnelli, key makeup artist Alisha L. Baijounas, on set to make sure we knew what artwork/outfits/makeup would look in the brighter prime universe and the darker parallel universe. For example, everything in the prime universe is colorful and the parallel was darker and more black or gray in tone.

5. As a filmmaker, you've explored various genres and narrative styles. What draws you to tackle different storytelling approaches in your work?

I love the process of filmmaking and the character interactions it entails, and how I (hopefully) entertain people with what I created, once completed. I think, regardless of genre, storytelling is a unique adventure to each film. I also like to put my own touches into each of my films including a running gag, the Peterson name, which is in every one of my films since GIRL WITH GUN.

6. How did you navigate the crowdfunding process for "Occupants," and what role did community support play in bringing the project to fruition?

We used the Indiegogo platform to successfully raise the money for the film. It helped because we had an actor of STAR TREK fame, Robert Picardo, as one of our cast members. We targeted the STAR TREK crowd and including various perks including a set visit during Picardo's filming day.

7. Can you share any insights into your experience working with the cast and crew of "Occupants," including your collaboration with actors like Robert Picardo?

It is very one-on-one with each cast and crew member. I like to plan everything out before filming and work with each of these people to come up with a game plan. I like to take their ideas and integrate them into my own so it's definitely a collaborative process. For example, if an actor is tongue twisted on a word, I let the actor change the script to something that is easier for them to say, which in my opinion will make the performance better because they won't be "thinking" on how to pronounce a difficult word and instead are able to "act" more naturally.

8. "Occupants" delves into themes of identity and parallel universes. What message or takeaway do you hope audiences receive from the film?

I think it is that we make our own choices and those choices can lead us in different directions. When you are confronted with a darker parallel version of yourself, you start to question your own life and whether you can ever become like that parallel version.

That is the case with Annie Curtis especially, seeing what her counterpart has done throughout the film and that leads her to different choices.

9. Beyond “Occupants,” do you have any upcoming projects or themes you’re eager to explore in your filmmaking career?

Yes, I am currently in post-production on my sixth feature film STAYCATION which is due to be completed in 2 months. The film began with a prequel film called ROUTINE, which was a 5-minute film, initially just a camera test of our new 6K pixel resolution camera package, that we happened to get right before the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. Along with my late longtime filmmaking partner Emile Haris, we expanded ROUTINE into a sequel feature film called STAYCATION as part of a pandemic horror franchise (I also have written a 93-page STAYCATION 2 already). Not only did our ROUTINE actors reprise their roles (Paige Laree Poucel, Bill Victor Arucan, Alan Courtright), but we also cast newcomers Gilles Stricher, Bailey Sorrel, Catherine LaSalle, Lilly Ivring, as well as name actors Olivia d’Abo (STAR WARS: THE RISE OF SKYWALKER, THE WONDER YEARS, CONAN THE DESTROYER), Sean Kenney (STAR TREK: THE ORIGINAL SERIES), Tracee Cocco (STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION, STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE, STAR TREK: FIRST CONTACT), Eileen Dietz (THE EXORCIST), Kelli Maroney (FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH), and Laurene Landon (MANIAC COP 1 AND 2). Not only that, we also ran a very successful Indiegogo Campaign (202% raised). We hope that people who see this film will enjoy the film, as well as the magnitude of the filmmaking process we went through from our initial filming in November 2020 to June 2022, to make this movie a reality.

10. As a filmmaker who has worked on both independent and studio projects, what do you see as the biggest challenges and rewards of each approach?

I think each has their own pros and cons. What I like most about independent projects is that you are forced to be innovative and creative, especially when it comes to filming with only a set amount of money raised. For example, if you have to film 20 shoot days instead of 21, which happened on my second feature film CHASING THE GREEN, what do you need to eliminate or combine to be able to make your shoot days? I’ve had to think like this on many occasions, to think outside the box. However, filming in studio also has its perks, as many things you need (camera equipment, props, etc) are all there at your disposal and makes the filming process that much easier. That was the case when we filmed STAYCATION at Nvisionate Studios.

11. How do you balance your artistic vision with commercial considerations when developing and producing your films?

I think you need to start with a smart script, think about which locations to film at and how to shoot in the most efficient manner. Then you add on name actors who will bring their commercial value to the project and be able to attract investors at the get-go and viewers when you completed the film.



