

## INSIDE THE INDUSTRY

With Tony Farinella

Russ Emanuel marks his professional feature film directorial debut with "P.J." Originally from San Francisco, he grew up in both Japan and the United States, garnering an international viewpoint of the world throughout his childhood. He wrote his first screenplay in 1993. He then went to the University of Southern California in Los Angeles to study Cinema-Television, International Relations and Japanese. More recently, he wrote a 10-part fantasy saga and a science fiction trilogy, worked as the "Assistant to the Producer" on "The Failures", and founded his production company Russem Productions in 2002, "Her Knight", "Mavet", and presently "Girl With Gun" and "Perfect Red" being the first films under its banner.

**TONY:** For those who might not be familiar with you, tell us about yourself, Russ.

**RUSS:** My name is Russ Emanuel. I'm a filmmaker, of course. I guess this interview is about my first feature film that I directed, which is "P.J." The film features John Heard, Vincent Pastore, Patricia Rae, Hallie Kate Eisenberg, Glynnis O'Connor, Eddie Malavarca, and Robert Picardo. It's my first film with name actors. I feel very grateful to be at this point in my life. I went to school, of course. I went to USC, getting a minor in Cinema and took classes at UCLA Extension. Upon graduation, I made my own short films. I started out (professionally) in 2002 with a short film called "Her Knight." That was my first one.



I met a lot of the crew that I work with to this very day. The composer, Neil Argo, just did an incredible score for "P.J." We have a nice documentary about it on the "P.J." website. Emile Haris, who was the editor for this film, worked with me on all my shorts. After "Her Knight," I made a short film called "Girl with Gun." "Girl With Gun" got into over thirty festivals. It definitely gained a lot of recognition. It won a lot of awards, which I'm incredibly grateful for. Because of "Girl with Gun," I was able to raise funding for "P.J." along with my business partner Howard Nash, who's also stars in "P.J." He started the project, and I came on board and helped get more funding. We shot "P.J." from December to February in New York and Los Angeles and we're currently in post.

**TONY:** What was USC film school like?

**RUSS:** I took a lot of critical studies classes. It taught me about film analysis. All you really need to do is watch films and analyze them. That's what the USC program taught me. And you do have to go out there and work on other films. I worked as a PA on a feature film called "The Failures." It really opened my eyes. You need that real-time experience. So, if you want to be a director, you really need to analyze films and figure out how it works. That's what USC taught me.

**TONY:** What was it like growing up in Japan and the U.S.?

**RUSS:** It definitely gave me an international viewpoint of life. I respect all cultures and all religions. I've seen it first hand. I grew up in two very different cultures (United States and Japan). I've traveled with my family around the world as well. I've taken family vacations in Italy and Thailand. I've really seen the world. And I went to an International High School (in Japan) as well. That helps out. I was ready for an international university like USC. It has the biggest number of international students. It did in the 90's I know. I try to understand everything. I try to put this internationalism into my films. I try to respect everybody. It's the same with me. I'm half-white and half-Japanese. I have two very different cultures in my blood. I'm very glad I was brought up that way. It definitely gave me a respect for all walks of life.

**TONY:** Who were some of your favorite filmmakers growing up?

**RUSS:** That's a good question. I grew up on Spielberg and Lucas films. I grew up on Richard Donner's "Superman." I remember I started loving film music from "Jurassic Park," which I saw when I was a teenager. I'm a big fan of "Star Wars" and "Star Trek." I'm a big Sci-Fi geek I guess. I definitely love those films. And film music is a big part of that.

"The Empire Strikes Back" is one of my favorite films. It's a Sc-Fi film, but it's about the characters. That's what I liked about it. It's about the dramatic interaction. It's about the story as well. In that episode, it was especially strong in my opinion. I just really liked that. I love character conflict. It's better than the usual cardboard cutouts that you get with a lot of films. I don't like seeing one-dimensional characters. I want to see them develop. Films like "The Empire Strikes Back" helped me to see that.

**TONY:** When was the exact moment that you knew you wanted to become a filmmaker?

**RUSS:** As soon as I was born. (laughs) As a kid, I used to build sets out of shoe boxes and use Lego characters. I did stop-motion with Lego's. I remember using an 8-millimeter video camera, which is now defunct. It was pretty big in the late 80's and the early 90's. I built shoe boxes of medieval kingdoms. I'm a big fan of Fantasy as well. I built these medieval kingdoms. I played with the Lego figures and made a film.

For our senior project, we had to do something that took the whole school year to make. It took an element of risk and it took a lot of our energy. I decided to do a film. It was a "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine" episode. I went through development, pre-production, production, post, and publicity. I finally completed it. When we finished it up, we had a screening for the whole school. We had a screening in the auditorium. I guess that was the premiere of the film. We even made some money back from selling the videocassette! This was before DVDs! From what I hear, it inspired a cinema program at my school. I'm glad it helped. And it was very fun to do it. Looking back on it, it wasn't a very good film. There were a lot of problems. For a sixteen-year-old kid, it was wonderful. I really loved the experience.

I also remember doing some documentaries in college. I did a Japanese documentary. I shot some footage of the Japanese New Year. I had my friend narrate it. After I put it together, I submitted it for a contest.

I remember my parents saying I watched "Superman" fifty times. I don't really remember that! I was just really inspired by that film. I loved the ideals of the "Superman" character. I loved everything about it. I was very eager to see "Superman Returns." Thankfully, it was faithful to the first "Superman" film.

**TONY:** What was it like going from being a film student to actually making your own short films?

**RUSS:** After I graduated from USC in 2000, I started writing a lot. I wrote some screenplays. I had the theoretical knowledge of filmmaking by analyzing film. That being said, I had no idea how to make a film. I worked on "The Failures," which I talked about earlier. I learned a lot from that. It was the first time I had seen a film shot on an HD Camera on the Independent level. This was in 2002. Nancy Schreiber, the cinematographer, had never handled an HD camera before. I remember going to her house when she was doing tests. It was a very good experience. I got to see pre-production and production. Also, I got to see how everything was handled after you finished shooting. I got to see how you have to return the equipment and sign paperwork. I definitely learned a lot.

I decided to take some directing courses at UCLA extension. I took other courses as well such as cinematography. I took numerous courses and learned different techniques. We actually had to make films of our own. I really enjoyed that hands-on experience. All of that made me confident. It made me confident that I could do a film. It's daunting for anybody. I thought to myself: "If I didn't give it a try now, it might never happen." I decided it was time to do it. I actually met Emile Haris (the "P.J." editor) at UCLA. We met during a directing course at UCLA. We have a friendship to this day. We wanted to write a simple story that was economically feasible. He had the camera for the "Her Knight" project. We went through all the stages together. We did learn along the way as well. That's how I made that transition. Once you get the knowledge, just go for it.

**TONY:** What was it like going from short films to your first feature film?

**RUSS:** It's very daunting. Not only that, I knew I was going to be working with name actors like John Heard. So here's how I convinced myself I could do it:

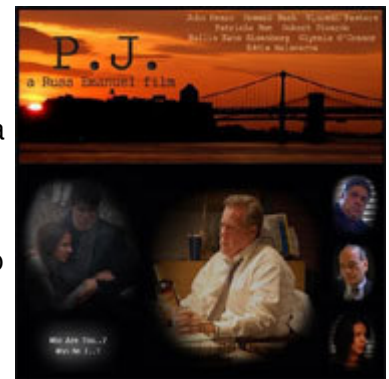
I know how to make short films. I made a very successful one in "Girl With Gun." I know how to do it. This is just a short film on a feature film level. I'll just do the same steps that I've done on my shorts. I'll just do it on a feature level.

In a sense, I guess the transition was easier than when I tried to make my first film in "Her Knight." In another sense, it's a whole new world. With my short films, we shot them in only six days. When it comes to "P.J.," we had fifteen shooting days. We also had two more days in L.A. to get the final footage in order to make a final cut. It was seventeen days total. I moved from L.A. to New York for a whole month. I stayed at my sister-in-law's apartment while she moved in with my brother Chris (Emanuel). She was very kind. Her name is Kimmy Emanuel. She was very kind to let me stay there for a whole month.

So to sum up: I'm around people I don't know. I'm directing a feature for fifteen days. We were shooting six days a week. The only days we had off were Christmas and New Year's. It's daunting. We also have these seven name actors in the film. But I knew I could do it. I love film. I just pushed ahead and took it one step at a time. I'm eternally grateful.

**TONY:** Tell us about "P.J."

**RUSS:** "P.J." is more of a spiritual film I would say. It's about a guy who has amnesia. He was in an accident and something happened to him. He has burned hands. He doesn't remember how it happened. He's transferred to a psychiatric doctor, who's played by John Heard. He has a week to try and diagnosis him and get him better before he has to be moved to a state mental institution on orders by his superior, who's played by Robert Picardo. With the help of his assistant, who's played by Vincent Pastore, he's trying to get it out of him. Is he crazy? What happened to him? How did he burn his hands? After a while, they're able to bring in his very bitter ex-girlfriend, who's played by Patrica Rae. He has to figure out what happened to him. There's a spiritual twist to it as well. That's about as much as I can say without giving it away.



**TONY:** Is it hard to direct from someone else's material?

**RUSS:** For me, no. I just take the material and direct it. I'm very faithful to it. Every time I take someone else's material, I know it's their baby. I want to be as faithful as possible. While it's my own vision, I also converse with the writer. I talked with the writers from "P.J." before I started shooting the film. I wanted to get their point of view. In fact, I feel honored to take someone else's script and bring it to life.

**TONY:** Was it intimidating to be working with so many big name actors?

**RUSS:** Oh, yeah! (laughs) I would be a hypocrite or a liar if I said no. John Heard was acting before I was born. It's very surreal. It was very intimidating. At the same time, they are just human beings. They're human beings who love to act and make a great story come to life. That's how I treated them as their director. I treated them as fellow human beings. In that sense, it wasn't intimidating. We're all in it together. We're in it as a family. You work together and collaborate. We all collaborated together to make "P.J." happen.

**TONY:** What did you learn from shooting your first feature?

**RUSS:** First and foremost, I want to have more shooting days. We did manage to do it, but I would want maybe a week more next time. I learned how to manage everything on our budget. We had to make due

with the budget that we had. We had to look and see what's economically feasible and what's not. We had to do a lot of preplanning. We made some mistakes, here and there. That being said, I think it would have been lessened if we had more shooting days. I would want a lot more rehearsals. We had some rehearsals, but not as much as I wanted. But, It went pretty smoothly for the most part. I was very happy. We all worked together very well. We were pretty efficient. In the end, we felt good when we had that wrap party.

**TONY:** What's your most vivid memory from shooting "P.J.?"

**RUSS:** My most vivid memory is probably when we were doing location scouting (in November). We were trying to find a good location for the hospital. I remember when we went to Williamsburg, which is where we ended up shooting. We went on the roof, and I looked across the roof and saw Manhattan. I remember saying to myself: "We're shooting here." It was such an incredible view of New York. It's amazing. We made use of it in the film. We were able to have some great shots with John Heard there. We shot the scenes during "magic hour" when the sun is setting. It's one hour where the lighting is just perfect. It's this beautiful red-orange hue. That's my most vivid moment.

**TONY:** If someone is reading our interview, tell them why they should see "P.J."

**RUSS:** It's a very good film! It has a very strong story with incredible actors. They're all wonderful together. When you put them all together, it's just magic. I would see it because it gives you hope. It's entertaining. It's just a really well-done film all around. It has an incredible live orchestral score by composer Neil Argo. From early reviews so far, it's been really positive. I have great hopes for it. I really think it will touch a lot of people. I really do.

**TONY:** When can we see your film?

**RUSS:** We'll be done with the film in July. We'll probably premiere in New York and L.A. We're going to have two premieres. We hope to get into The Toronto Film Festival around September. I would say the earliest for the viewer is September. I'll keep you updated on it, Tony. You can pass along the information to everyone if they want to check it out.

**TONY:** What are your plans after "P.J.?"

**RUSS:** I want to do a bigger film with a bigger budget. I hope it's longer than "P.J.," which is 91 minutes. I want to do a longer film. I want to work with a bigger budget. I have several scripts that I've read so far. We're waiting to see the reception that "P.J." gets. Right now, it's all about "P.J." That'll help determine when we're going to do the next step, which is another feature film. That's all I can say right now.

**TONY:** What's your advice to future filmmakers who are having a tough time getting their film made?

**RUSS:** Passion and persistence. The two P's. You have to be persistent. I remember last year I was just adding my-space friend after my-space friend. I was up all night doing it. It's a lot of work, but it gets your message out there. You have to send your film out to festivals. You have to hammer away. You should probably start with a short film. It's not that hard to do these days. It's very cheap. The cost of making a film has lowered dramatically from 10 years ago. You have to keep hammering away. If you really love film, you'll find a way to do it.

**TONY:** Best of luck to you and your film, Russ.

**RUSS:** Thanks Tony for your time as always. I appreciate it.

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