

LEFT: Writer-director Marcus Perry.



New Writer Profile

Marcus Perry

Razor Sharp: Near-Future Action With An Old School Twist

For Marcus Perry, making the action short *Razor Sharp* was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. Perry fell in love with action films after seeing *Die Hard* in fourth grade and has been influenced by the work of James Cameron and George Lucas. "This is what I always wanted to do," Perry says. "Even in high school, I was writing and directing and shooting movies on the weekend." It was no surprise when the native Texan moved to Los Angeles and enrolled at the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television. After graduating in 2002, Perry was introduced by his USC screenwriting mentor Sandy Berg to the management team at Bender-spink, where he is now repped. Perry has been working as a screenwriter and producer since then, but what he really wants to do is direct.

Perry's lifelong interest in comic books and graphic novels have shaped his storytelling and writing style, but prior to *Razor Sharp*, he had never attempted to write a short film. "I really wanted to do an action movie, and a short film was all I could afford. The real challenge, for me, in writing *Razor Sharp* was to do the story I had in my head as a short because it was something I had always wanted to expand into a feature-length film. So, trying to condense it into 20 minutes was very difficult."

To raise funds to make *Razor Sharp*, Perry set up a fiscal sponsorship through the Film Arts Foundation in San Francisco so that all contributions were tax-deductible. "Then I knocked on the door of every person that I'd ever met in my life. It was a great experience because I had to learn how to get all kinds of people excited about the project."

Razor Sharp is a fast-paced, high-gloss action short made in the tradition of feature-length, Jerry Bruckheimer-produced films. Perry's first draft of *Razor Sharp* was more serious than the fun, tongue-in-cheek version that made it onscreen in the final cut, and he admits the choice to use comedy elements in the script came later in the development process. "I had seen so many near-future movies where the whole aesthetic is very bleak and tense and joyless," Perry says. "I

wanted to do a near-future movie that felt like a classic adventure film that didn't take anything or anyone too seriously."

Perry is quick to point out that the comedy elements he added to the *Razor Sharp* script later made casting it very tricky. "We saw a lot of actresses who played [the heroine] like *Tomb Raider*. It was all about looking cool and being badass. But I was really interested in finding somebody who didn't take herself too seriously. As written, every time Veronica Sharp wins, she loses. Anytime she does something cool, then something bad or embarrassing happens to her. When we found actress Cassidy Freeman, she understood that and had enough confidence in herself to go for it."

The supporting cast of *Razor Sharp* features smart and stylish acting performances from Michael T. Weiss of *Crossing Jordan* and *The Pretender* and Skye McCole Bartusiak from *24* and *Riding in Cars With Boys*. Perry made a point of using identifiable archetypes to create the characters in *Razor Sharp* because he felt it would help audiences connect with the characters quickly, which was a big plus for a short-format film.

"When I'm writing a feature-length action script," Perry says, "I usually structure the film around five or six big action scenes, and I have the action affect the characters emotionally in some way. Either they learn a lesson, or it changes their perspective, so it's not like I just slugged in an action scene here and there." But when he wrote an action film in short format, Perry decided he had to get creative with the set-up. "I crunched the screenplay into a non-linear structure. Otherwise, there would've been three scenes of heavy exposition at the beginning followed by nonstop action."

In his mind, he carefully separates the chores of a writer-director-producer. "I try to create the story as the writer first and foremost and not think about how I'm going to actually turn the script into a film as a director during the writing process because I find that I'll censor myself. I'll say things like 'This is crazy, you can't have them falling down an air shaft to escape. They should just walk out of the room.'"

"I imposed some limitations on the script

during the writing process because of the budget. I produced a short a couple years ago, and when we did location moves in the middle of the day, it killed us. I knew the only way we were going to get the look we wanted with a one-week production schedule was if I limited the locations. We built a couple of sets and ended up doing as much as we could in one place."

Perry didn't want his project to be a run-of-the-mill, shoot 'em up, blood-and-guts action film because the other huge influence on his cinematic storytelling is Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. "I really wanted to do *Razor Sharp* with a strong female protagonist and the same kind of tongue-in-cheek tone. So, we did the action like *The A-Team* where a bunch of guys run into a room, spray the place with machine gun fire, and can't hit anything."

With a budget of under \$100,000, Perry and his dedicated production team, who he says were all big "Buffy Geeks," managed to make a short film that really packs a punch. "I tried to get the script as tight as we could before we went into production so that I wouldn't have to rewrite at all. I could just shift gears and direct."

"Action is fun to write. It's the dialogue and character interaction that is the hard stuff." But for Perry, it's also the most important element. "I heard George Lucas say that special effects without a story are pretty boring. It's something that I've always tried to take to heart when I write action. I know that unless the audience cares about the characters, unless they're invested in the story, there are no stakes and everything on the screen is just window dressing. In so many recent action movies, you expect huge special effects and explosions. Sadly, the one thing you don't expect is fully developed emotional relationships between the characters."

With *Razor Sharp* in the can, Perry is back to writing his next spec script. "I'd love to use this film as a proof of concept to go on and direct a feature version as my next project. I've been working as a writer for so long, that's what I will always be. And I'm fine getting pigeonholed into being an 'Action Guy' because that's the genre that I really love." ✎