

QUEST

Muscular Dystrophy Association

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FILMMAKER DEFINES DETERMINATION

by Phil Ivory

It's rare, but not unheard of, to see a movie in which the story's main character is in a wheelchair or has some other disability. For something a little more unusual, how about a movie in which the lead actor or actress has a disability in real life?

Or, rarity of rarities, what about a movie that stars an actress with a disability and is directed by someone who also has a disability?

"Ready, Willing and Able" is a film independently produced in Orlando, Fla., that answers to that description. And while you may not immediately associate using a wheelchair with espionage, explosions, action and adventure, Jenni Gold, the movie's director, thinks it's time we started letting heroes with disabilities have their fair share of thrills, chills and even spills.

Gold, 32, grew up in Florida and has spinal muscular atrophy (SMA). She uses a motorized wheelchair and drives an adapted van.

Her action thriller, "Ready, Willing and Able," has as its main character a former CIA agent disabled in the line of duty named Samantha Martin, or Sam, played by television actress Christopher Templeton. Templeton, whose disability was caused by polio, can walk with a cane but uses a manual wheelchair for the post-accident scenes in the movie.

Finding that her former employers no longer think she's up to the job now that she's in a wheelchair, Sam sets out to prove them wrong by using her skills to break into a high-security building. There she comes upon the makings of a terrorist plot. Her discovery propels her into a number of perilous situations and provides the impetus for her to assemble a team of confederates and prove what she's really made of. The plot calls for lots of action including many physical stunts involving the main character.

Gold, who served as co-writer and co-producer on the film as well as director, finished principal photography last year and has spent recent months in post-production, while simultaneously searching for a distributor. Getting an independent film widely seen is a difficult challenge no matter how commercial the concept is. But Gold isn't afraid of challenges, or she would never have set out to become a director.

"It's crazy, isn't it? To do an independent film is very, very difficult. I've chosen a career that is one of the most difficult to get into regardless of your physical abilities," she says. "But I don't know if I chose it or it chose me."

THE LURE OF THE CAMERA

Early on, Gold showed a willingness to take on challenges despite her SMA, and she credits her parents for helping her develop this kind of positive mind set. "They were very supportive when I was growing up," she recalls. "I always went to regular schools and they always told me there was no such word as can't."

MDA played a small but important role in Gold's development as a film artist. As a youngster affected by a neuromuscular disease, Jenni volunteered to appear at MDA events and functions in Florida, appearing on the local Telethon broadcast and in short MDA films.

"I was always looking at the cameraman," she remembers, "I was always asking him how things worked, the lighting and all the behind-the-scenes stuff. I was intrigued by the whole process of how films were made."

Gold's enthusiasm for television and film was helped along by a TV production class she took in high school. She went on to study at the University of Central Florida, graduating summa cum laude with a B.A. in film/motion picture technology and an additional B.A. in radio and television.

Her first film was a short about aliens who get the wrong idea about which species on Earth is dominant, and adopt the disguise of a dog. "It was a comedy," she says. "It was OK for my first attempt."

A FRIEND IN THE BUSINESS

Once, when she was working as an intern at Universal Studios Florida, she encountered Jerry Lewis, who was there directing an episode of a TV show called "Superforce." For Gold, Lewis was a figure of special significance, not only as MDA's national chairman and Telethon star, but also as a film director

who had achieved world renown.

She had met him once before when she was about 10 at a Florida theater. "He remembered me from when I was a child, and actually told me more about the night than I had remembered.

Then he invited me to stay with him while he was there directing. That was great because, by that point, I knew that my main focus was being a director. It was a really good experience, especially seeing how he worked with the talent and kept their spirits up."



Future director Gold with her mentor in 1990.

Gold has always been interested in incorporating disability into her films, going back to a short student film called "Panic," which portrays the emotional plight of a disabled man who imagines a number of troubling

scenarios while waiting for his attendant to arrive. The film won a student Emmy. Another student production gave her the chance to shoot scenes using the famous "Psycho" house at the Universal site in Orlando.

Gold gained other useful experience in the communications industry by working as a radio copywriter and also as a free-lance video editor, using the nonlinear AVID system, which allows film or video images to be manipulated while stored on computer memory.

"I think it makes me a better director, because I know how I'm going to put something together before I shoot it," she says of her experience as an editor. "Besides, in independent filmmaking, it's good to have that back-

ground because you need to be able to wear different hats."

SEARCHING FOR THE RIGHT STORY

After graduating in 1992, Gold established her own corporate film and video company, and also began work on a concept for a feature film about Beverly Chapman, a woman from Florida who had muscular dystrophy and crusaded for disability rights.

"She was always fighting for somebody else," Gold says. "She laid a lot of the groundwork that people in my generation who are disabled take for granted. I have a sticker on my van that allows me to go through a toll booth without rolling down the window and trying to get change. That's because of the Beverly Chapman Act. Her life story is really amazing."

Gold met with Chapman to work with her, but Chapman died before the project's completion. Gold bought the rights to the story.

"As remarkable as she is, and as fascinated as I am with telling her story, I was having trouble finding the funding for it," Gold says. She decided to put the project temporarily on hold and develop a story with broader commercial appeal for her initial foray into features, preferably one with lots of action and suspense.

One day, she was speculating with colleagues about the kind of stunts that could be designed for a person in a wheelchair. "We kind of laughed about it, and then the idea turned into a CIA agent who is disabled and wants to go back to work but they won't give her a chance. I like doing things that nobody else has done, that's neat and exciting. My writing partner and I had a really good time putting her in all kinds of situations." Thus, "Ready, Willing and Able" came into being.

"At one point, we blow up a building and she comes flying out. It's pretty cool. We take the action part very seriously," Gold says.

The film was shot entirely in Florida, with local film professionals who showed a special commitment to the project. "They believed in what they

were doing and wanted to help out," Gold says. "They weren't in it for the money. They could make more money working on a commercial, but they believe in independent films.

"We were sort of like a family. That's one thing I picked up from Jerry Lewis about having a very happy set, a very family kind of atmosphere."

During production, Gold was aided by one of Lewis' cinematic innovations, the patented "video assist" system he created during filming of "The Ladies Man" in 1961. It employs a secondary videotape camera keyed on the same image as the main film-loaded camera, allowing the director to watch a scene on a video monitor while it's being shot, without the necessity of peering down the camera lens. It also makes it possible to view an instant replay without waiting for film to get back from the lab.

Gold says the system makes "a world of difference" because it lets a director stay on top of the scene even when it's impossible to remain close to the action.

STAYING TRUE

Gold was adamant that the actress hired to play Sam have a disability in real life. "I felt she would be able to relate to the character better that way."

Gold found everything she wanted in Christopher Templeton, an experi-

enced and versatile actress who played a series lead for 11 years on "The Young and the Restless" and who had guest starred on shows such as "Frasier" and "Civil Wars."

"She was wonderful to work with, a great pro. Since then, we've become friends," says Gold, who hopes that "Ready, Willing and Able" will be successful enough to spawn a film sequel or TV series about Sam Martin.

She says she believes that people with disabilities will resonate to scenes in which Sam runs up against prejudice and misconceptions, but that they'll also feel gratified by Sam's ability and skill. "She's tough, and she ends up saving the day because she's such a great marksman and can handle any situation," Gold says.

As for the nondisabled community, Gold wishes to entertain as much as enlighten, but she does hope that viewers will end up thinking differently about those with disabilities.

"Maybe they will go away thinking that people shouldn't be underestimated. That would be nice."

ENJOYING THE PAYOFF

Gold admits there are moments when the work is grueling, especially in the Florida heat. "But I would do it again in a heartbeat because, all in all, it's very enjoyable," she adds. "And the



Christopher Templeton, actress, bonding with her director, Jenni Gold.

payoff is being in the audience when the film is screened."

In particular, she enjoys seeing how her words and images cause an emotional response in audience members, such as the "oohs" and "ahs" elicited from a roomful of fifth graders when she recently showed them scenes from "Ready, Willing and Able."

Jerry Lewis played one additional role in Gold's professional development. He signed some of the paperwork necessary for her to become a member of the Directors Guild of America. "So now I'm a DGA director," she says.

"Basically, there are a few mentors that I've had in the business, and he is one of them," Gold says of Lewis, with whom she still keeps in touch from time to time.

Lewis is pleased by Gold's progress as a filmmaker. "Jenni is a marvelous talent, a lovely and accomplished young lady," he says. "I'm grateful and honored that she considers me a mentor. She's chosen one of the toughest jobs anyone can aspire to, film directing, but she has the artistry, the discipline and the drive to make a true success of it."

Lewis adds: "It's wonderful the way Jenni's able to explore disability issues in a realistic and positive way, while producing work that's fun and suspenseful and exciting all at the same time."

Gold and her producer, Jeff Maynard, recently embarked on a cross-country trek, taking turns driving their van from Florida out to Los Angeles. Along the way there was time for a brief stopover visit at MDA's national headquarters in Tucson, Ariz., but then it was on to Hollywood to set up meetings with distributors and start spreading the word about "Ready, Willing and Able."

Once the film has gotten wide exposure, Gold has a Hitchcock-style thriller in development for her next project. She remains committed to developing and directing entertaining stories of all types. If and when a character with a disability is portrayed in one of her films, she'll see



"They believed in what they were doing," says Gold of her dedicated crew.

to it that the character isn't stereotypical.

Gold's advice for others who have a dream they wish to pursue: "Don't let anybody tell you you can't. Whatever it is you desire to do, and no matter how impossible it may sound, if you're talented in that area, I say you should pursue it. A lot of it is not giving up. Sometimes people get tired of not getting to where they want in their career and so they quit trying.

"My problem is I love it so much I can't stop. I'll continue to follow my dream and not let anything get in my way."

(For further discussion of the way disability is portrayed on film, see the article titled "Disability in the Media: The Movies" in Quest, Vol. 4, no 4.) □

For the current status of
"Ready, Willing and Able"
and other Jenni Gold projects,
check her Web site at
[www.geocities.com/
Hollywood/Set/1108/](http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Set/1108/).