

'My New Gun': Shot With Humor

By Hal Hinson
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William Carlos Williams wrote a poem that goes like this: "So much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens." Substitute a gun for the red wheelbarrow and you begin to grasp the dramatic crux of writer-director Stacy Cochran's coolly funny, immaculately modulated first feature, "My New Gun."

So much, indeed, depends on this chrome-plated, pearl-handled revolver that Gerald (Stephen Collins) buys for his wife, Debbie (Diane Lane), because he feels "too exposed" in their peaceful suburban neighborhood. Exposed to what? is Debbie's question. Lawn sprinklers? From her back door, all she can see is a golf course, and from her front door, miles and miles of cookie-cutter town houses just like her own. Why in heaven's name should she need a gun? She doesn't want it, but there it is, in the drawer of her bedside table, and afterward nothing is ever the same.

Debbie and Gerald's two-car garage life is so insulated and comfortable that it is almost entirely without incident. Sure, Gerald breaks the martini pitcher—which he then makes Debbie clean up—but that's about as bad as it gets. Otherwise, their marriage is numbingly routine. In the morning, Gerald goes to the hospital (he's a doctor as well as a jerk), and Debbie piddles away her day until he comes home. That's it, day in and day out.

Until Debbie gets her gun, that is.

A recent graduate of the Columbia University film school, Cochran isn't interested in making an anti-gun statement here, and though she does an exquisite job of rendering the couple's deceptively serene, upper-middle-class existence, she's not a social critic either. Instead, she's stealth ironist with a low-key, wholly unexpected sense of comedy. As a humorist, Cochran is a bank-shot artist, kissing her jokes gently off the cushions, and with so much spin that you're never quite sure where they're going to go.

The point could be made that the movie isn't about guns at all. The gun, as Cochran uses it, is merely a catalyst, the straw that stirs the drink. The real subject is the couple's tottering, passionless relationship, which is like a gun just waiting to go off.

When the side arm is first brought into the home, Debbie can't get it off her mind. She's so distracted that she can't even sleep or make love to her husband, and for hours during the day, she sits in a chair, staring at the drawer where it's kept, as if she were standing guard,

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Trouble in the 'burbs: Stephen Collins and Diane Lane in "My New Gun."

terrified that the thing might jump out on its own and go off on a rampage.

Gerald thinks Debbie is merely being perverse. He sees her refusal to go along with this manly desire to protect his spouse and their worldly goods as a childish act of spite. Must she question *everything* he does? Must she always be so damned difficult? Cochran's depiction of the tensions within the marriage is beautifully nuanced; she and Lane (who gives a ravishingly witty performance) show what Debbie has to go through with this fatuous, status-obsessed lunthead. And perhaps only a woman director could capture how Debbie, though far brighter than her husband, is forced to subordinate herself and kowtow to his whims.

Bumped along by Pat Irwin's eclectic score, the movie has a funky rhythm all its own. And though Cochran's storytelling style is relaxed and unhurried, the film builds up enough momentum to work as a kind of slow-motion farce. The arrival of James LeGros as Skippy, the couple's mysterious young neighbor, quickens the pace and increases the weirdness factor too. When Debbie confesses her uneasiness about the weapon, Skippy helps out by stealing it, toppling the initial domino in a long chain reaction of disasters, the first of which lands Gerald in the hospital with a bullet in his foot.

Left on her own while her husband recovers, Debbie moves by slow stages into a relationship with Skippy, who lives with his mother (Tess Harper) and, from the start, is obviously smitten with his across-the-street neighbor. Skippy is a great character, but a hard guy to get a fix on. At first, he seems brain-damaged; it's as if his synapses had a built-in tape delay. Gerald thinks he's a psycho, but, then again, there are only two kinds of people in the world for Gerald: Satan worshipers and model consumers who wear Gore-Tex windbreakers.

But Skippy turns out to be a person of far greater substance and intelligence than he lets on. And his budding affair with Debbie gives the movie a genuine sweetness of spirit. Strangely enough, they seem made for each other.

The picture is small enough in scale to be almost a miniature. Yet Cochran has so perfectly drawn the proportions of the characters and their actions within this limited frame that the film never seems paltry or underdeveloped. The world she creates in "My New Gun" is full of tiny eccentricities and delights. It's a doll's-house world, tiny but whole.

My New Gun, at the Key, is rated R for language and adult situations.