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Jennifer Esposito Spins the Mafia Genre on its Head in Directorial Debut Fresh Kills



Jennifer Esposito is the kind of actor you'll recognise, but might find hard to place exactly where from. She shines in supporting roles in multiple successful series – as Brenda in *Awkwafina Is Nora From Queens*, and CIA boss Susan Raynor in *The Boys* – but not yet had her moment in the spotlight. As an actor, she's a joy to watch on screen: easy, comfortable, malleable. But as for so many women actors, the roles that are on offer to her are limited, as are the stories she gets to be a part of telling.

So, she decided to make her own movie, on her terms, with her distinctive voice. *Fresh Kills* is Esposito's writing and directorial debut. It premiered at Tribeca Film Festival in June. It

Esposito stars as Francine Larusso, mother to two girls: Connie played as a teen by Odessa A'Zion (Grand Army) and Rose, played by Emily Bader (My Lady Jane). Whilst Connie is seemingly content with her own little world, Rose quietly struggles under the weight of expectation. She dreams of escaping their Long Island organised crime life, but can't imagine herself ever making it.

The film has been a long time in the making – Esposito started conceptualising the story around twenty years ago and has been developing the idea ever since. It emerged out of both personal experience and an understanding of the world around her as one that makes it very hard to escape whatever box you're placed in. "I felt like I kept hitting my head up against a wall in many areas of my life, and I thought, this is one of them, where I'm feel like I'm placed in a box that I don't feel I belong in, or I just didn't want to be in. How do you jump out of that? It's not waiting for someone to say, hey, come over here. You have to do it for yourself."

And so she did. Making art has always been important to Esposito. For her, it speaks to what it means to be human. "There's something so beautiful and broken, and lovely, and awful and gross and fantastic about the human experience. And to me, if you're going to exist here, you might as well put all the experiences into something whether it be acting or music, or any kind of art, because it's such an amazing gift of expression, but it's also the gift for someone else," she says.

Esposito also teaches acting, and in one of her all-women classes she asks students to talk about an experience where they apologised, but on reflection realise that perhaps they didn't need to. It's a beautiful experience, Esposito says, because it's so rare to see. "As women, we're not supposed to be angry, we're supposed to be grateful, quiet, kind and sweet, and sugar and spice and all that crap. But we're a lot of things, and we're allowed to be a lot of things."



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confines of family loyalty and the status quo.

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In Esposito’s commitment to pushing boundaries and forcing us to re-examine oppressive stereotypes, one of the most memorable scenes of the film sees Connie embroiled in a physical altercation with another young woman that leaves her black-eyed and bloody-lipped. It’s shocking because of how rare it is to see women fight like that on screen. Then, you reel at the very fact that you’re shocked in the first place.

Why are we so caught off guard by violence between women, and yet inured to the same in men? “It’s because we’ve been taught we’re not supposed to react like that,” Esposito says. “Violence with men is glorified.” It’s not that Esposito wants to paint violence in a positive light, or to make it a “female” trait, but rather to push us to question our own assumptions about masculinity and femininity, gender roles and how we frame and understand the world around us in such binary and limiting terms.

This isn’t abstract for Esposito – growing up in Long Island herself, the women around her were always more multifaceted than they’re often portrayed in popular culture. “There was rage, and they were going to express it the way they knew how – like their male counterparts did. I just found it incredible how many people are so uncomfortable with those [fight] scenes. I have to be honest, they didn’t even compare to what I saw growing up. Not even close. And if I had more money in my budget, those scenes would have been more brutal.”

The way *Fresh Kills* was funded is another unique and extraordinary part to this tale. It’s the first feature film financed and traded by a global group of fan investors. For the blockchain illiterate (like me) it’s a little complicated to grasp, but essentially the film was set up as an NFT that people could purchase using Ethereum via a platform called Upstream.

Easier to understand are Esposito’s reasons for funding the film this way. She was offered big money to make it, but only if the actor playing Joe, Esposito’s mafia husband in the film, was centred in the marketing and press. “Find someone really famous for the role,” she was told. “Make him the main pull of the film,” and we’ll give you \$5m. Don’t do that, and you get nothing. Esposito knew that even with this funding, most of it would have to go to the male actor, despite the film being carried by women, written and directed by a woman, with a crew predominantly of women, and women leading the

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Words: Molly Lipson

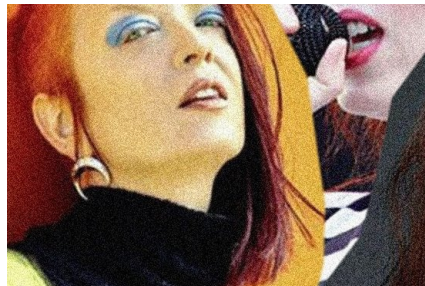
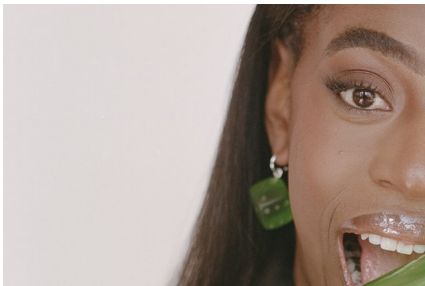
Fresh Kills is currently screening across the US and in the process of seeking distribution.

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