

‘Elektra Luxx’ Offers Middling Showcase For Carla Gugino

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Sebastian Gutierrez is the sort of filmmaker who thrives best on the festival circuit. His work is just quirky and distinctive enough to garner overenthusiastic praise from jaded festival goers in the mood for markedly lighter fare. Yet when screened out of the celebratory atmosphere at SXSW, Gutierrez’s films fail to register as anything more than mediocre trifles.

“Elektra Luxx” is a more assured and likable film than its lifeless predecessor, “Women in Trouble,” but it’s still nowhere near as funny or insightful (or sexy) as it thinks it is. Gutierrez seems to be fashioning these estrogen-fueled ensemble comedies after the work of cinema master Pedro Almodóvar. Imagine “Volver” as a sitcom on TV Land, and you’ll get an approximate idea of this picture’s playful, curiously amateurish tone. The gags are as broad as the drama is campy, yet what more can one expect from the co-writer of “Snakes on a Plane”?

Like “Women,” this film mainly serves as a showcase for the considerable talents of Gutierrez’s girlfriend and frequent collaborator, Carla Gugino. Her empathetic portrayal of the titular porn star makes this mess more diverting than it has any right to be. As the film opens, the newly pregnant Luxx is attempting to part ways with her adult film career, opting instead to teach at a community center. Her class? “How to Act Like a Porn Star in Bed,” of course. She’s soon approached by hopelessly needy flight attendant Cora (Marley Sheton) with a proposition straight out of an Atom Egoyan picture. Cora wants her husband to be seduced so she can feel less guilty about her own infidelity. But Luxx ends up mistaking a hunky private detective, the wonderfully named Dellwood Butterworth (Timothy Olyphant), for Cora’s husband. One of the film’s most unexpected highlights is the way in which a low-key Olyphant injects his all-too-brief screen time with much-needed charm and class (seriously, the film could’ve used more of him). He’s one of the few members of this crowded, overqualified cast that manages to leave some semblance of an impression.



Carla Gugino and Timothy Olyphant star in Sebastian Gutierrez’s Elektra Luxx.

Photo credit: Samuel Goldwyn Films

The intersecting story lines function as little more than a narrative crutch for Gutierrez, who never gives his characters enough time to rise above the level of a colorful sketch. If the writer/director had devoted enough time to exploring the budding attraction between Luxx and Butterworth—the two most appealing people in the film—he may have been on to something. Instead, he stuffs the film with various subplots that fail to coalesce, resulting in a mismatched series of vignettes that continue to stumble over one another. The experience is akin to flipping channels on a television equipped to only play censored soft-core porn. Nearly every sequence in the picture plays like an awkwardly structured prelude to a gratuitous sex scene that never arrives. Instead, the viewer must endure a series of monologues about self-acceptance and self-actualization that feel like claustrophobic acting workshops rather than raw expulsions of the soul. I kept waiting for the cast to break out into an inexplicable musical number (which happens to be a Gutierrez specialty), set to the tune of “Tiny Toon Adventures”: “We’re touchy, we’re feely. We’re all a little sleazy.”

Adrienne Palicki reprises her role as the dim-witted porn actress Holly Rocket, who secretly harbors a crush on her best friend Bambi (Emmanuelle Chriqui). Holly is clearly designed to be the terminally naïve, twentysomething twin of Rose Nylund on “The Golden Girls,” yet her impossibly thick-headed dialogue is more irritating than funny, not to mention abysmally written. “I’m not the sharpest stool in the shed!” she exclaims. It’s the sort of line that wouldn’t even garner a canned chuckle on “Two and a Half Men.” And yet, Palicki brings a rather endearing vulnerability to the role that makes her third act confession scene genuinely touching, despite its aura of phoniness. All of these actors are far more deserving of better material, and yet bigger names continue to sign on for Gutierrez’s vehicles (god forbid he becomes the next Tyler Perry). After appearing in an unfunny credit cookie in “Women,” the ever-marvelous Joseph Gordon-Levitt returns as an online porn connoisseur who hosts a web show in his basement. Armed with the same tireless exuberance he brings to every project, Gordon-Levitt milks the role for all its worth, even when his character is required to whine at his badgering, off-camera mother. Note to filmmakers: no character who whines at his badgering, off-camera mother is ever funny unless his name starts with Rupert and ends with Pupkin.



Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Malin Akerman star in Sebastian Gutierrez’s Elektra Luxx.

Photo credit: Samuel Goldwyn Films

At least Lucy Punch, recently seen as Anthony Hopkins’s wholly improbable flame in “You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger,” scores a legitimate laugh early on as a humiliated housewife. Other guest stars aren’t as lucky—including Justin Kirk, Kathleen Quinlan, a naked Vincent Kartheiser (Pete Campbell on “Mad Men”) and an uncredited Julianne Moore as the Virgin Mary (no joke). Luxx seems as shocked as we are to see one of the finest actresses in modern cinema suddenly materialize in this picture. When the frazzled porn star begins to blab on and on in the presence of greatness, Mary warns, “People tend to abuse this privilege.” Moore can now add Gutierrez’s name to the long list of directors who’ve wasted the privilege of working with her (Gus Van Sant, Steven Spielberg and Ridley Scott immediately come to mind).

Yet the biggest casualty in this cast is Gugino, who gets the opportunity to do everything short of inhabiting a credible character. She mugs for the camera in glib porn parodies, croons a torch song, chews the scenery as Luxx’s lisping jailbird of a twin sister, and bursts into tears after reading a note asking, “What kind of person are you?” For the record, that actually made me laugh. Gugino is sorely deserving of a worthy star vehicle, but she’s going to need a better script and director to help make that happen. “Elektra Luxx” is the sort of film best watched out of one’s peripheral vision, making it ideal for streaming on Netflix. Perhaps Gutierrez is heading in the right direction with his next comedy, “Girl Walks Into a Bar,” the first feature-length, star-studded picture made solely for the Internet. Gutierrez alludes to his future cinematic goals after the “Luxx” credit cookie: a faux trailer that concludes with the admittedly amusing line, “Coming soon as an exciting digital file to download everywhere.”

‘Elektra Luxx’ stars Carla Gugino, Adrianne Palicki, Emmanuelle Chriqui, Marley Shelton, Timothy Olyphant, Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Kathleen Quinlan. It was written and directed by Sebastian Gutierrez. It opened March 11 in New York and L.A., and is available on Video OnDemand. It is rated R.



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