

tion of this youth floundering in an urban scene with which they're more than familiar, and while they are scarcely pushing philosophical or socio-economic generalizations, Bruno's adventure does seem meant to evoke understanding. (A previous Dardenne film, *Rosetta*, helped lead to the passage of a minimum-wage law for youth in Belgium.)

At the end, *L'Enfant's* resolution, and its impact, are balanced on the possibility of redemption and hope. You may find yourself withholding judgment of Bruno in the face of *L'Enfant's* powerful sense of transcendent potentiality.

*L'Enfant* will be shown through May 9 only on the Emerging Cinema screen at the Market Arcade Film and Arts Center, 639 Main Street.



Linda Cardellini as Mary-Anne in *American Dream*.

## NITRATE TRACES

### *American Gun*

review by M. Faust

Reviews of the film *American Gun* inevitably seem to frame it in comparison to *Crash*, which isn't fair. The similarity is that both movies examine a social issue though a large number of characters, most of whom are unrelated to each other. But *Crash* was hardly the first film to use that structure: Robert Altman has often employed it, most notably in *Nashville*, and it's been a staple of independent films of the last decade. Besides, *American Gun* was in production well before *Crash* was released.

And even if you could make a case that writer Steven Bagatourian and director Aric Avelino were ripping off this year's Oscar laureate, at least be happy they're ripping off a good movie.

*American Gun* looks at the effects of guns—handguns, more specifically—on people in three disparate locations. In Oregon, Janet (Marcia Gay Harden), a single mother with one teen-aged son, faces the impossible task of getting on with her life three years after her other son was a participant in a Columbine-like rampage. He and his partner killed several schoolmates before being shot to death themselves by the police.

On the anniversary of that event, the local news media rehash it. She accepts money to be interviewed on television, thinking that it will help pay the tuition at the private school her son David (Chris Marquette) now attends. Instead, it reopens the wound in the community, making life worse for both of them.

In Chicago, high school principal Carter (Forest Whitaker) is on the verge of burning out. He moved his family to an inner-city neighborhood where he thought he could make a difference, but it's an uphill struggle, especially when he discovers an honor student (Arlen Escarpeta) carrying a gun. The boy has

good reasons that Carter is hard pressed to dispute: is he fighting a losing battle?

The third thread involves almost no use of guns at all. In Virginia, Carl (Donald Sutherland) is a kindly shopkeeper running the business that has been in his family for several generations. His granddaughter Mary-Anne (Linda Cardellini) is sent to work there while she attends the University of Virginia—neither of them her choice but a family tradition. But Carl's business is a gun shop, and while he runs it with pride on the assumption that he is dealing with hunters and collectors, Mary-Anne sees the world much differently.

*American Gun* is the first feature from these filmmakers, and it shows. While an excellent cast does typically strong work, some of the confrontational scenes needed to be a little better honed. A few of them play like improvisational exercises. And there's a potential for melodrama that the script ill-advisedly gives in to. The strength of the film is that it prefers to ask questions rather than preach answers, which makes it a difficult story to conclude: the way Bagatourian and Avelino have chosen seems pointlessly harsh, like a demonus ex machina.

But despite its weaknesses, *American Gun* is a thought-provoking film that poses hard questions about a difficult topic. No matter what your opinion on the issues surrounding the presence of hand guns in modern America, you'll find things in here you won't easily be able to answer.

*American Gun* will be shown on May 10 and 11 only on the Emerging Cinema screen at the Market Arcade Film and Arts Center, 639 Main Street.

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