



**HOMEMADE**  
**HOLLYWOOD**



**FANS  
BEHIND  
THE  
CAMERA**

**CLIVE YOUNG**



ity often with false pretenses. She acts sexy in front of men to throw them off guard, and when the moment is right, she strikes. She can hold someone hostage and be very sensual, but when need be, she can be a stone-cold bitch, which is great. Power Girl, on the other hand, is funny because she has the body of a hot chick, but she could honestly care less. I show Power Girl as a tomboy with feminine charm, and I think there are a lot of girls who might identify with the idea, "It's OK to be you, but it doesn't mean you have to hide your femininity either" I think that's what Power Girl represents: being yourself no matter what anyone else says.

Notarile isn't the only one exploring those concepts through fan films. Trade in those superpowers for big guns, color the hair brown, keep the "hot tomboy" premise, and you get Lara Croft of the best-selling Tomb Raider video game series. Croft was portrayed by Angelina Jolie on the big screen in a pair of critically loathed feature films, but in the fan movie world, the gunslinging heroine was embodied by an entirely different actress—Valerie Perez—in the 40-minute 2006 flick *Tomb Raider: Tears of the Dragon*.

As resourceful as the heroine she portrayed, Perez was key to the production not merely because she was the film's lead but also due to her real-world abilities. An IT analyst with a degree in neuroscience, Perez created all the CGI visual effects in the film, helped develop its premise, produced the flick, handled location scouting and—since she's a certified fire safety officer for film and TV production—set off all the film's explosions. For Perez, who grew up outside Los Angeles as the only child of a single, working mom, the appeal of making a fan film came from an entirely different place: "I needed something to draw me out of my shell . . . while also improving communication skills that were pretty underdeveloped from growing up a lonely kid."

The ever-confident Croft wound up being a persona that Perez would try on like a costume—which, in turn, was how she got into fan filmmaking. Interested in using Adobe Photoshop software to alter pictures of herself as Lara Croft, she had friend Nick Murphy, then a recent film school grad, take some shots of her. He suggested that they shoot a Tomb Raider music video,



and Perez returned that they do a short film instead. Three years and \$3,000 later, the film was completed, nabbing Murphy his first director credit while getting pictures of Perez plastered all over the Internet as well as UK tabloid *The Sun* and her own four-page spread in U.S. B-movie magazine *Femme Fatale*.

Despite the press focusing on her looks, Perez was less concerned about objectification of her character and more interested in ensuring that Croft didn't come off as a saint—something that was accomplished by blowing away plenty of bad guys. "I had to draw the line [to] not overly glorify my female character," she comments. "Selling a beloved character short is by far the biggest no-no on Hollywood's part that fan films try to correct."

The basic premise of the film, like most Tomb Raider games, finds Croft in search of an ancient artifact. As a result, she explores caves in the desert for a while, goes deep into an urban industrial area to take down a mobster and his heavily armed crew, and then explores a different set of caves and tunnels to find her treasure.

Given the variety of colorful and distant locations, it was up to Perez, wearing her producer hat, to keep things moving throughout the three-year, part-time shoot. "I welcomed the difficulties of limited resources and the creative troubleshooting of production," she recalls. "You tend to be shorthanded on a fan film, especially due to scheduling trouble, but there can be instances where you have a dozen friends watching, particularly if you're shooting a fight scene. Thankfully, that was the case one night in a rough part of Oakland, where there was safety in numbers."

According to Perez, roughly half the film's crewmembers were women:

Most of the females that participated were easy to get interested because they were already fans of our main character, and half the actresses were Lara Croft cosplay [costuming] models I knew. Our [female] music composer came forward on a *Tomb Raider* chat forum after having previously developed scores inspired by the video game. Women's interest to take part in or lead their own production seems to catch on fastest by seeing more and more prominent examples of women in fan film cast and crew roles. Demystifying the





Valerie Perez's *Tomb Raider* fan film led to her being hired to portray comic book character Paula Peril in a short directed by Bill McClellan (left) that was written by *Peril*'s creator, James Watson (center).  
(Photo by the author)

process and spreading around a few filmmaking how-to's makes a big difference to those sitting on the fence.

The experience that Perez gained from the production paid off a few years later when she recounted some of her efforts to James Watson, head of Atlanta-based indie comic book publisher Atlantis Studios. Putting her acting and pyrotechnic abilities to work, Watson produced a film short based on his company's comic book, *Paula Peril*, starring Perez as the title character, a Lois Lane-style reporter who gets into terrible scrapes.

"We looked into doing a live-action short, *Paula Peril: Trapped in the Flames*," explains Watson. "What we found out was that it costs as much to create a five- to 10-minute film as it does to do one issue of a comic book. It's amazing what fan film people are doing with no budget and no hope of revenues; they're doing