

Armorer found guilty of involuntary manslaughter in tragic death on the set of *Rust*

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On Wednesday, the armorer (weapons handler) on the film *Rust*, Hannah Gutierrez-Reed, was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter for the accidental killing of the film's cinematographer during a rehearsal on October 21, 2021.

After deliberating for some three hours, the jury in the First Judicial District Courthouse in Santa Fe, New Mexico convicted Gutierrez-Reed for handing a loaded gun to actor Alec Baldwin before it went off and killed Halyna Hutchins and wounded director Joel Souza.

Gutierrez-Reed was found not guilty of a second charge of tampering with evidence. The 26-year-old was taken into custody after the verdict was read and now faces up to 18 months in prison.

The tragic fatal shooting of cinematographer Hutchins, 42 years old and considered a rising star in the filmmaking business, shocked the industry, since live ammunition on a movie set is supposed to be strictly banned.

The prosecution in the case argued that Gutierrez-Reed had been negligent on the set of *Rust*, a Western being film at Bonanza Creek Ranch in Bonanza City, New Mexico. Crew members were called as witnesses and testified she had been disorganized and functioned in a haphazard manner in relation to the prop weapons and ammunition during film production.

While preparing for a scene, Baldwin was setting up camera angles with Hutchins in a wooden church when Gutierrez-Reed handed him a replica of an 1873 Colt 45 revolver made by Pietta, which had a live round in it. As Baldwin was backing out of the building, the firearm discharged and shot Hutchins in the stomach and Souza in the shoulder. While Souza later recovered, Hutchins was flown to University of New Mexico

Hospital in Albuquerque, where she was pronounced dead.

An armorer is a licensed professional tasked with making sure that firearms are safe and secure on a movie set. There are rules for the chain-of-custody for both weapons and blank ammunition, and the armorer is solely responsible for all of these steps.

The prosecution accused Gutierrez-Reed of bringing the live ammunition that killed Hutchins onto the set and that she failed to ensure the weapon was only loaded with blanks. They presented a photo of the armorer that they claimed showed her with live rounds early in the filming. Police investigators found a total of six live rounds at the scene after the shooting. However, Gutierrez-Reed denied bringing the live rounds onto the set.

Prosecutor Kari T. Morrissey said during closing arguments that Gutierrez-Reed was “negligent,” “careless” and “thoughtless” for being unaware that live bullets had mixed with dummy rounds in a box of ammunition on the set.

The burden of proof for conviction required that the jury unanimously agree that the defendant had known about the danger involved on the set and that she acted with a “willful disregard for the safety of others.”

Gutierrez-Reed and Baldwin were both charged with two counts of involuntary manslaughter by the Santa Fe district attorney on January 23, 2023. On June 22, Gutierrez-Reed was additionally charged with evidence tampering for allegedly transferring “narcotics to another person with the intent to prevent the apprehension, prosecution or conviction of herself.” She pled not guilty to both charges on August 9, 2023.

Defense attorneys in the trial argued their client could

not be held criminally responsible because she was unaware there were live rounds on set, and could not have predicted that Baldwin would point a gun at a crew member. The defense also questioned the evidence provided by the sheriff's office, which waited for more than a month to search the office of the film's primary weapons and ammunition supplier who said the live rounds did not come from him.

More fundamentally, the defense denied Gutierrez-Reed was the source of the live ammunition, and defended her as a young armorer whose authority was overridden by producers who sought to minimize costs, rushing the crew. They maintained she was overburdened with extra prop duties.

A key witness for the defense, an inspector from New Mexico's Occupational Health & Safety Bureau, testified that the *Rust* production did not give Gutierrez-Reed enough time to "conduct her duties to the best of her diligence."

While accidental deaths from prop weapons are rare, there have been 43 deaths on movie sets since 1990, and more than 150 other individuals have been left with life-altering injuries, according to a study conducted by the Associated Press.

The dangerous working conditions on the set of *Rust* are part of deepening attacks on film industry workers that were at the heart of the months-long writers' and actors' strike last year. The entertainment unions are fully complicit in the deterioration of conditions, having signed one concessions contract after another, subordinating themselves entirely to the conglomerates.

When viewed within this broader context, the conviction of Gutierrez-Reed for Hutchins' death amounts to the scapegoating of a young film industry worker for the deteriorating and deadly circumstances created by film industry owners and investors driven solely by profit-making motives.



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