In his best-selling book about the early days of the space program, Stoff, Tom Wolfe describes the stunned reaction of John Glenn when he learned he would not be the first American to venture beyond the atmosphere. As Glenn enviably contemplated the good fortune of Smilin' Al Shepard, NASA's chief, he had been consumed by an even grimmer realization: "He, John Glenn, for the first time in his career, would be one of those who were left behind." In other words, Glenn had failed. And failure implied a shortage of the right stuff.

Failure remains the cardinal sin of North American culture. Nobody likes a loser, worst of all a good loser. Success is everything. And in business — arguably, our dominant cultural activity — the pursuit of success is raised almost to the spiritual plane. To be branded a loser within the business community, utterly bankrupt of the right stuff, tantamount to having leprosy.

"After the Axe is essentially a film about losing, its central character, Doug Barton, is a former marketing executive with a major food company. After 15 years of solid service, he's pulling down $65,000 plus perks and is ready to plant his nameplate on the door of the company president. Instead, a long-time rival gets the top job, and, in a fit of pique, he appoints Barton to do humble, cleaning, Wilson gets axed.

"It was so clinical I couldn't believe it," says Biff. "And it was a horror show. Just the bastard had me out the door in 10 minutes.

Wilson's departure is expedited by the corporation's designated hit man, an executive relocation counselor named Eric Barton. (Like most of the film's characters, Barton is no actor; he's a real-life relocation counselor playing himself.

"It's in your best interests to leave this office this afternoon and behave in a professional manner," Barton informs Biff, nearly relieving him of his credit cards and office keys along the way. "It's all right. I know how to behave," Biff replies, upright to the end.

Thus begins Biff's plummet from the exalted position of interviews and other docus footage with Biff's unforgiving story is complicated by the aforementioned use of non-actors, playing themselves in a fictitious context. It is reasonably well joined by Roger Mat-tisuia's narration, but the viewer may find himself still puzzling over the film's balance of fictionality and realism.

Biff launches into his "re-packaging" with economy and a sense of style. A single shot of Biff, his face creased with age, grabbing a newspaper from a street vendor as the crowd hustles by, says more about the success ethic and its costs than any sociologist's thesis.

Exposure is an attempt to get at the besieged area of alcohol and drug treatment, the subject Biff knows so well. He and a flock of pin-striped jaded young people get fixed. The era of the hard-nosed manipulative corporate executive is coming to its end, and the reaction to it, he marvels afterward, "That bastard," he adds. "I'm really cynical about the whole attitude in Canada, and how they kill their young... and then all of a sudden these characters gave us these awards."

Exposure was shown on CBC in the Man Alive time slot on a Sunday night, between Marketplace and The National. Stea imagines "all these working people looking for deals, how to protect themselves against the corporate structure, and how we can put this film about of and a sort of a photograph and what's this all about? Laughter! That's great, today anyway. I'm really cynical about the whole attitude in Canada, and..."


"After the Axe" is a fine film, produced by a talented and dedicated group of people in a cooperative rather than an independent mode. The film avoids clichés — partly because Gunnarsson and Lucas chose to use real-life characters and events within a fictional framework. Many, including an ex-Ottawa Journal editor who was on hand when the newspaper committed hari kari, have a stake in the film and their presence lends the film a peculiar resonance.

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