

Sturla Gunnarsson's After the Axe

In his best-selling book about the early days of the space program, *The Right Stuff*, 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 enviously contemplated the good fortune of Smilin' Al Shepard, NASA's nominee, he was 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, is tantamount to having leprosy.

After the Axe is essentially a film about losing. Its central character, Douglas ('Biff') Wilson, is a 45-year-old senior 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 tidy bit of corporate house-cleaning, Wilson gets axed.

"It was so clinical I couldn't believe it," he marvels afterward. "That bastard had me out the door in 10 minutes."

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

"It's in your best interests to leave the office this afternoon and behave in a professional manner," Barton informs Biff, neatly 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 rarified environs of upper management to his austere cubicle at Barton's executive recycling service, where 100 fired executives gather daily for pep talks and counselling. "It feels like a hospital ward," Biff reflects. A place where broken people get fixed.

He undergoes mock interviews, career assessments, and personality profiles. He and a flock of pin-striped cast-offs listen intently to the guidance of Professor Barton, as he prods them to "Use people. Use people like you've

never done before, and don't be afraid or ashamed to do it."

Biff launches into his 're-packaging' program. He styles his hair, dresses for success, and even submits to a Rocky Balboa-inspired fitness program, hoping to recapture the veneer of success, that aura of righteous stuff. And though he eventually has to lower his sights, Biff does succeed in landing another job.

But that's incidental. The real story is Biff's fall from grace, and the reaction to it. His business colleagues shun him. Office flunkies give him the run-around. His status at home becomes that of a dependent house-husband. His children resent him.

Director Sturla Gunnarsson, 29, and writer/producer Steve Lucas, 28, establish Biff's decline and subsequent resurrection 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.

Except for Biff's needlessly stereotyped teenage son (Randy Solomon), the film avoids clichés — partly because Gunnarsson and Lucas chose to use non-actors within a docu-drama format. Many, including an ex-Ottawa Journal editor who was on hand when the newspaper committed hari kari, have an intimate acquaintance with the axe, and their presence lends the film a peculiar resonance.

But credit is also due actor James B. Douglas, whose Biff is a curious blend of brittleness and vulnerability, aggression and verisimilitude. He looks suitably businesslike and calculating, but his Dr. Welby demeanor lends him an air of softness.

The juxtaposition of interviews and other docu footage with Biff's unfolding story is complicated by the aforementioned use of non-actors, playing themselves in a fictitious context. It is reasonably well joined by Roger Mattiussi's narration, but the viewer may find himself still puzzling over the film's fictional vs. non-fictional aspects long after Biff's re-entry into the workforce.

The steel and glass towers of the Bay Street canyon, Barton's clinic-like offices, and the functional, rather sterile atmosphere of the white collar workplace, give the film a dreary quality. Two sequences are particularly effective: one involving a group of businessmen in a martial arts class, while Dr. Jim Paupst, a psychologist, discusses his concept of the "businessman warrior"; and the second, which takes us on a tour of Stanley Warshaw's New York-based 40 Plus Club, a sort of mausoleum for discarded, middle-aged business executives. It makes Barton's offices look like a country club.

Gunnarsson and Lucas have tackled an important, difficult subject. It is said that 250,000 executives are fired in North America each year, and with the long-term shift to white collar jobs continuing, the politics of corporate survival will gain an increasingly high profile.

After The Axe has been aired on CBC's national network, and the business mentality it examines may have raised a few eyebrows; but Eric Barton's was not among them.

"I think there's going to be more people terminated in future," he says. "Companies now expect more from fewer resources. The era of the hard-nosed manager is coming back. And hard-nosed managers fire people."

Gary Lamphier ●



● "Alberta Watson has a powerful rapport with the camera." Margaret Dragu (left)

Angelo Stea's

Exposure

Exposure is an attempt to get at the bisexual ambiguity and surface-tension of Toronto's so-called 'artistic subculture' in a half-hour drama. It is the story of a trendy, ambitious photographer's tentative affair with a lovely school-teacher who reluctantly becomes his model and lover. He is waiting for New York connections to get him out of the "strictly middle-class market" of Toronto, and he is sure that her face will do it for him. It evokes the shallowness common to the photographer-model dynamic, and suggests the dehumanizing nature of the activity. The relationship and the film end when he discovers that she is a lesbian, and he packs to leave for the Big Apple.

Technically, this is a fine film, produced by a talented and dedicated group of people in a co-operative risk-taking spirit very rare in the English Canadian film community. However, the narrative is minimal and fragmented; like a sketch, it represents the outline of a story. The script lacks the closely wrought texture and unity of impression which a half-hour drama, like a one-act or a short story, needs. Lack of funds required radical last-day surgery on the script — which had already been cut to half its original length. The film was financed by writer/director Angelo Stea, co-writer Peter Lauterman, and producer Wayne Aaron for a mere \$33,500, and looks as if it cost twice that amount. It was their first independent drama, but all three have worked extensively in the industry.

Alberta Watson gives a fine, subtle performance as Barbara, and has a natural and often powerful rapport with the camera. Angelo Stea describes the sexual dilemma of her character: "There are a lot of people walking around down on Queen Street who are not really sure what persuasion they are... She just wanted to give it another

try." Roger Guetta is not bad as the selfish 'artist' Tony, but he didn't have the manic intensity which might have made the relationship more convincing. As it is, he's just another character on the make; slick, selfish, but unfortunately also a bit flaccid. In the supporting role, as Tony's friend Michael, Geza Kovacs is quite strong. He discovers Barbara with her lady love, Margaret Dragu, in the quintessential art-deco Queen St. restaurant, the Blue Angel, beneath the eyes of the androgynous vamp, Marlene Dietrich. The flicker of recognition and sadness which crosses his face then is perhaps the film's richest moment, in terms of its apparent theme of deceptive appearances.

The fact that no one took the credit for art direction indicates the extent to which the project was a collective effort. The lighting and camera work is clean, and Stea is a promising director, despite his failure to make single shots replace scenes. The original soundtrack generally provides an appropriate, languid, blue background sound. The only technical flaw is the careless sound mix, which left some of the dialogue muddy.

At the Yorkton (Saskatchewan) Film Festival, *Exposure* won Best Film, Best TV Drama, Best Art Direction, and Best Actress (Alberta Watson). Skeptical about the "lottery" quality of many film festivals, and offended by the distinctly derivative style and spirit of the Genie Awards, the filmmakers withdrew their film from competition this year. Stea is grateful, however, for the recognition at Yorkton. "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 suddenly there's this film about sort of fags and sort of a photographer, and what's this all about? (laughter) 'MARG! Where's Knowlton?'"

Christopher Lowry ●

EXPOSURE. d. Angelo Stea p. Wayne Aaron sc. Angelo Stea, Peter Lauterman d.o.p. Robert C. New a.d. Steven Wright art d. Alfred, Enrico Campana, Elinore Galbraith, Carol Spier, Garath Wilson lighting Maris Jansons key grip Carlo Casanova cost. Delphine White make-up Shonagh Jellour hair Jocelyn McDonald cont. Barbara Rata ed. mix. Tom Mather ed. Avi Lev composer Marjan Mozeditch stills Rick Porter l.p. Alberta Watson Roger Guetta, Margaret Dragu, Geza Kovacs p.c. Exposure (Productions) col. 16mm dist. 7th Reynolds Media International running time 27 min.



● Sturla Gunnarsson, Steve Lucas