

||| FILM REVIEW

Your darkest day, as seen through rose-coloured lens



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PROBLEM SOLVING

When Annabelle Gurwitch, an actor and radio commentator, was fired from her dream gig acting in an off-Broadway Woody Allen play, she felt "crushed, humiliated and ashamed." Nothing unusual about that. But when the comedienne with an ear for irony started recounting her tale of woe to everyone she met as an alternative to "permanently assuming the fetal position," she found that every friend and colleague eagerly responded with his or her own account of being canned.

"And that's when I realized that I liked the stories about being fired more than the play I was fired from. Somehow, what you thought would be tragic becomes a great story later," she says in her film *Fired!*, an offshoot from her book, *Fired!: Tales of the Canned, Canceled, Downsized, and Dismissed*.

If you're expecting a serious treatment of the psychological or sociological impact of getting canned, forget it. This is not Dr. Phil, Bill Moyers or even Michael Moore.

Instead of eliciting empathy for those who have toiled in gritty industrial zones or in cubicle farms but then found themselves made redundant, Ms. Gurwitch colours every scene with tinkling ragtime piano and Woody-Allenesque urban self-mockery, as if to say: "I was fired and felt awful about it at first, but then so were all my talented friends who are all successful now."

Interviews with these actors and comics -- including Tim Allen and Anne Meara -- against fetching backdrops of the Manhattan skyline, in California hot tubs or dribbling basketballs on their own private courts tell us that even the exalted get canned: So don't feel bad! We were fired once, and look at us now!

"The experience of being fired has both challenges and opportunities. These are difficult times for people who have been 'unexpectedly leisured.' But humour is an extremely palliative mechanism. It's cathartic to hear stories and tell your own," Ms. Gurwitch tells me from her cellphone, while clomping around her house in Los Angeles, saying goodbye and giving lunch instructions to her husband and nine-year-old son.

As in the film, I am suddenly party to a slice of her well-spoken, wacky, show-biz-oriented inner world. It may not transfer so well to the life of the average working stiff, but for a few minutes it sure is fun.

The film kicks off in black and white, with scenes of Ms. Gurwitch joyfully dancing through the streets of New York after being hired by her cultural icon, Woody Allen, whom she deems so closely knitted to her identity as to be a member of her family, complete with photo on the mantle. Within three minutes, we're facing a tearful Ms. Gurwitch in colour as she faces a whiny barrage of criticism from a Woody Allen look-alike. With his back to the camera, this character tells her that her acting is "all bad, none of it's good. You look retarded. You're screaming. My hearing is impacted. I'm speechless."

Ms Gurwitch is soon broadcasting her experience everywhere she goes -- at the gynecologist's office, to her friends, at career fairs (where she stands in a red polka-dot dress under a huge banner that screams "I was fired! Were you?"), and to chipper transition and talent management consultants, who plumb the "growth industry" of being downsized.

One of the film's few moments of gravitas is in a scene when she asks one of the fired at the job fair: "Did they say, 'we have to let you go' with a sad face?" and he replies: "No, they got restraining orders."

But the emotional twinge passes quickly. There's no mention of studies showing that people with five years of seniority who lost their jobs during the layoffs of the nineties are now earning about 25 per cent less -- if they're employed.

They're also more likely to be smoking again if they had quit, to have persisting biochemical markers of stress in their bloodstreams and to be depressed -- especially if they had been highly involved in their jobs before being axed.

Unlike Ms. Gurwitch, my friends in the IT industry don't talk much about the day they came into work to find their computer passwords invalidated. One day they were respected members of the professional team. The next day they were given a garbage bag for their kids' school photos and escorted from their desks by security guards.

The film's theme, hammered home through her interviews, is that everyone gets fired, and you may not know it at the time, but being axed is really a good thing.

Speaking of fun, one of the funniest moments in this documentary is when Jeff Garlin, the affable, larger-than-life Larry David sidekick in HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, talks about the first time he was fired (there would be many more). He was a teenager working at a music store in the mall. "Get that hanger off your head, you idiot!" his boss screams in his face before axing him. After spending days hiding out at the beach instead of going to work, Mr. Garlin finally comes clean to his parents, whereupon his mother becomes upset. "What happened!" Then, dropping a full, disappointed octave, "Jeffrey . . . Oh, what's going to happen to you?"

That is precisely the question that darkens the nights of those who have been fired. If such queries don't become "hilarious" with the passage of time, then try Ms. Gurwitch's alternate reality, where "pain plus time equals comedy."

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.
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