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SXSW Film

Capsule reviews of films at the festival

Thursday, March 09, 2006

Maxed Out

★★★
A portrait of the consumer debt epidemic that is devastating an increasing percentage of American families, "Maxed Out" is infuriating and dispiriting, showing that things are worse than most of us probably believed. Viewers inclined to blame debt problems wholly on borrowers might think twice after hearing how lenders deliberately court those who are least likely to be able to pay — the ones who will rack up interest and late fees, turning lenders' huge profits into obscene ones. Then there are the horror stories in which completely blameless citizens are ruined by glitches in computer records of their credit. A few smart, thoughtful voices (like Harvard law prof Elizabeth Warren) put things into perspective, while filmmaker James Scurlock gathers evidence that our elected leaders are happy to stack the deck against the poor.

4 p.m. Saturday, 4:15 p.m. Tuesday and 11 a.m. March 17, Paramount.
— *John DeFore*

Fired!

★★★★Who knew getting fired by Woody Allen would be such a good career move? Despondent after losing a gig in one of Allen's plays, actress Annabelle Gurwirth seeks consolation from some very funny peers — actors, like Illeana Douglas and Jeff Garlin, who have their own tales of humiliating failure on the job. After putting together a stage show in which comedians tell their tales, Gurwirth digs a bit into the nationwide layoff trend beyond the entertainment industry; while she's not as thorough as a PBS investigation, she certainly brings an entertaining and humane point of view to the subject.

4:30 p.m. Sunday and 9:30 p.m. Wednesday, Austin Convention Center; 9 p.m. March 18, Alamo Downtown.
— *John DeFore*

Shadow Company

★★★★Given its ominous name and its politically loaded subject — the history and present-day workings of private mercenary armies — you'd expect "Shadow Company" to be a political screed, a fearmongering broadsheet about the world falling to pieces because of you-know-who's war. Not so. While this documentary is quite explicit about the drawbacks of having soldiers in war zones who are unaccountable to any government (and there are plenty) it is also sympathetic to "private military contractors" who are guided by their own codes of ethics and who on camera are often intelligent, thoughtful people instead of big slabs of amoral testosterone. Some scholarly talking heads discuss the millennia-old history of guns-for-hire, and specific attention is paid to the past decade or so of modern contractors. Most of the focus, though, is on how such companies operate right now, and what things could be done to make their existence less problematic.

2 p.m. Sunday and 11:15 a.m. Tuesday, Austin Convention Center; 7:15 p.m. March 18, Alamo South.
— *John DeFore*

(Expletive)

★★★★In the shadow of a best-selling scholarly book about "Bull(expletive)" comes this documentary about the f-word. With interviewees ranging from Miss Manners to the famously foul-mouthed Kevin Smith (along with some etymologists who debunk myths and tell us about the word's centuries-old history), the film runs the gamut from straight-out celebration of the expletive's unparalleled versatility and primal power, to analysis of the hostility it has aroused between "prudes" and "profaners." The filmmakers are clearly aligned with the latter, and occasionally indulge in excessive self-righteousness about freedom of expression (isn't profanity often used to deflate just this sort of seriousness?) — they point out every contradiction in the conservative stance but leave some on the liberal side unaddressed. It may not tell you much you don't know, but its editing is lively and there are plenty of laughs to be had.

6 p.m. Friday, Paramount; 11:59 p.m. Tuesday and March 16, Alamo South.
— *John DeFore*

Rank
★★

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