

Author mines getting canned for all it's worth

dan pine | staff writer

The day Woody Allen fired her, Annabelle Gurwitch didn't think America's iconic funny man was all that funny. Canning her from the cast of his 2003 off-Broadway play "Writer's Block," Allen told Gurwitch, "You look retarded."

After the initial sting wore off, Gurwitch turned her pink slip into pink lemonade. Thanks to her firing, she can now add author and filmmaker to her resume, with her new book "Fired" and documentary film of the same name.

"Fired" screens in San Francisco on May 19 and 20, with Gurwitch appearing at a book signing May 19 at A Clean Well Lighted Place for Books.

"I feel very passionately about this subject," says the L.A.-based actress and commentator. "While I was collecting stories for the book, I became genuinely concerned about the employment situation in America."

Both her book and film take a largely lighthearted view of downsizing. They feature interviews with dozens of Americans — many of them celebrities, many of them Jewish — all describing their personal experiences with getting sacked.

Those celebrities include comedians Jeff Garlin, Judy Gold and Jeffrey Ross, actresses Ileana Douglas and Felicity Huffman, commentator/actor Ben Stein, even former Labor Secretary Robert Reich. If that list seems to skew Jewish, there's a reason.

"My film represented how I reached out to my community," says Gurwitch. "My community happened to be the entertainment industry, and that happens to be largely Jewish."

The film had a sneak preview at the Aspen Comedy Festival in March, then an official premiere at the South by Southwest Film Festival in



Annabelle Gurwitch

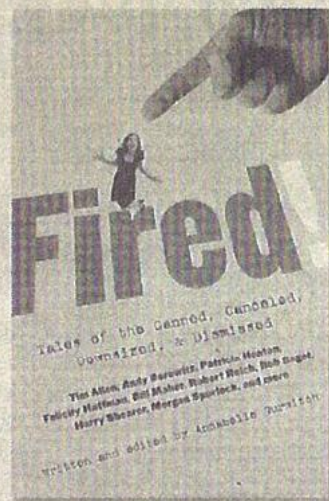
Austin. Later this year, the Sundance Channel will air "Fired," with a DVD version ready for retail after that.

While the book is mostly a straight-ahead compendium of amusing stories, the documentary is more personal, following Gurwitch herself on an odyssey through the unemployment lines. Though she touches on the macro-economic consequences of downsizing, Gurwitch chose to emphasize the emotional impact of being told to hit the bricks. "The more personal the story, the more universal it is," she says.

Her own story begins with a Jewish upbringing in

Annabelle Gurwitch will sign books at 7 p.m. Friday, May 19, at A Clean Well Lighted Place for Books, 601 Van Ness St., S.F. "Fired!" written and edited by Annabelle Gurwitch (\$19.95, Touchstone, 235 pages).

The San Francisco Documentary Film Festival will screen "Fired!" at 9 p.m. Friday, May 19, at the Roxie Film Center, 3117 16th St., S.F., and at 7 p.m. Saturday, May 20, at in the Women's Building Auditorium, 3543 18th St., S.F. Tickets: \$10. Information: www.sfindie.com.



Miami Beach. "I was named president of my confirmation class," she recalls, "at which point I declared I was an atheist." Gurwitch later attended NYU before launching a career on stage, screen and television.

Her sister Lisa Gurwitch is director of gift planning at the Jewish Community Endowment Fund of the S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation.

Ten years ago, Annabelle Gurwitch moved to Los Angeles with her husband, comedy writer Jeff Kahn. She worked as an actress, landing parts in films like "Pollack" and "Daddy Day Care" and TV shows like "Seinfeld," "Dream On" and "Boston Legal," but earned wider notoriety as host of the TBS series "Dinner and a Movie" and with her NPR commentaries on popular culture. But her greatest success grew out of her failure to hold down that job three years ago.

"My project focuses on what we as a country are doing or not doing for people who have lost their jobs," she says. "Do we really care about working people in America? This is something we should be thinking about as a nation."

Based on her film, people are thinking long and hard about it. She even got liberal economist Robert Reich and conservative Ben Stein to agree that the disparity between CEO salaries and those of average workers is far too great.

Then again, with show business as her métier, Gurwitch also found Reich pitching her on the acting talent of his son, and wondering if she could do something for him.

Meanwhile, she tours the country doing readings and book signings, as well as promoting the film and even a staged version of "Fired."

"It's my hope that in some small way the film will make people think about where we're headed. Through comedy, it brings it to people's minds." ■