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Canned Laughter by Greg Beato,,

Getting hired by Woody Allen? Hundreds of actors can make that boast; it's not a very exclusive club anymore. But getting fired by Woody Allen? That's a rarer, or at least less public, phenomenon, and in 2003 Annabelle Gurwitch had the good fortune to experience it for herself. After casting the actress in a play he had written, Allen started doubting her abilities soon after they went into rehearsals. "You look retarded," he told her during one critique. Shortly thereafter, Gurwitch found herself out of a gig. Shame and depression followed, but it turns out that Gurwitch's friends, and even her dry cleaner, loved hearing about her brushoff with greatness. To console her, they shared their own accounts of workplace rejection, and thus was born "Fired!," an anthology with contributions from Tim Allen, Felicity Huffman and various other famous and semi-famous entertainment-industry professionals.

It's a great idea for a book, because getting fired -- or at least getting fired from a job you don't care about very much -- is the perfect catalyst for storytelling. It's a traumatic event, but not as traumatic as, say, learning you have a horrible disease or getting dumped by a lover. But even when you get canned from a job that you endured because it was just a temporary diversion from your true calling in life, there's still the sting of rejection, the stink of failure. Getting fired tests your character in a pointed but manageable way. Unless you're the kind of person who keeps huge stockpiles of ammo hidden in your cubicle -- but this isn't that kind of book. Here, the tales of awful jobs, capricious bosses and just and unjust terminations are sometimes dark but ultimately played for laughs, adding up to a caustic but merry compendium of failure.

Take, for example, actor Tate Donovan's plight. Not only was he replaced by Matthew Broderick while shooting the movie version of "Torch Song Trilogy," but he also suffered the indignity of having to watch Broderick assume his role, because many of the scenes were being shot in front of Donovan's apartment building. "In perhaps one of the darkest and pettiest moments of my life, I called the police to complain about the noise from the production," he writes. "I thought all my prayers were answered when I heard the sirens blaring, only to peer down and see Matthew signing autographs and taking pictures with New York's finest!"

Sometimes, however, the impulse toward revenge manifests itself in more satisfying fashion. Gurwitch's own story is a good example of that phenomenon; she's turned her Woody Allen moment into a cottage industry of sorts. First, she used it as the centerpiece for a live theater show, now it's a book, and apparently a feature-length documentary is in the works, too. Meanwhile, critics in the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times described Allen's play as "weirdly dated" and "a little secondhand."

But if Gurwitch gets the last laugh, the curmudgeonly director still gets one of the best lines. "What you're doing is terrible, none of it good, all of it bad," he told her before giving her the boot. "Don't ever do that again, even in another play." If he can find a dozen or so other bosses who dress down their underlings with such brisk venom, he could publish a pretty entertaining anthology of his own.

Jonathan Yardley is away. His reviews will resume next week.

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