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Pushing It in Park City

“Series 7: The Contenders,” a spot-on satire of reality TV, makes Richard Hatch look humble



Abbot Genser

Brooke Smith plays the gun-toting, eight-months-pregnant champ of a reality TV show in “Series 7”

By B.J. Sigismund
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Jan. 20 — Sundance is not for sissies. If my first day at the festival taught be one thing, it's that you've got to be aggressive here or you're going to spend a lot of time out in the cold. Shuttles don't get met, stomachs don't get filled and screening tickets don't get handed to you without a lot of planning, pushing, schmoozing and schlepping on your part.

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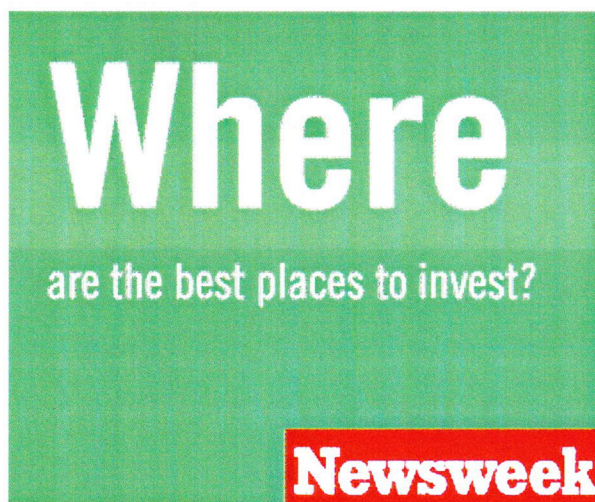


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Newsweek
B.J. Sigismund
 ASSOCIATE EDITOR

MY FIRST DAY began outside the very crowded 11:30 a.m. premiere of "The Business of Strangers." As I suspected, my "events press" badge would get me bubkis in this situation; without any planning on my part, I'd have been put on a long waiting list with the general public. Fortunately, I'd spoken with the film's publicist beforehand, and she promised to have a ticket for me. But when I got there, 30 minutes beforehand, my PR contact was nowhere in sight. I sweated it out for 25 minutes while shiny, happy filmgoers went on in—even people from the waiting list started getting access—until I was finally given my own ticket. I liked the first half of the film, a feminist tale that stars Stockard Channing as a depressed CEO and Julia Stiles as a wild child who changes her life, but felt its message got garbled at the conclusion. New York Newsday critic Jan Stuart, who was seated next to me, completely disagreed. Guess that's a good sign.

Things went smoother getting into "Some Body," the next movie I saw. I had a ticket waiting for me when I got there. The film, about a late twenties L.A. woman struggling with conflicting needs regarding her sexual relationships, was shot entirely on digital video a la "The Blair Witch Project." The team behind the movie—three people who wrote, starred, and directed themselves—not only crafted an 80-minute feature for a fraction of what it would cost if they'd used celluloid, but put forward an honest story that wasn't afraid to explore the darker parts of our sexual psyche.

The day's highlight by far was the evening premiere screening of "Series 7: The Contenders." The parody of reality TV, which will be released in March, has some of the best buzz of the festival and getting access to the first screening again took a little work. But



► A year-by-year tour through Sundance's bright spots

I really shouldn't complain. I sat in a center seat, in a row one-third of the way back in the auditorium, and took in what is destined to be one of the most talked about movies of the year. Conceived by writer/director Daniel Minahan in 1996—four years before anyone had heard of Richard Hatch—the film presents a TV game show in which contestants must kill each other to win. Shot like “Cops” crossed with “Access Hollywood”—both the director and cinematographer had worked in production on similar TV shows—the film follows a group of six gun-toting Americans as they eliminate each other. As was the case with Oliver Stone's “Natural Born Killers” (1994), some audiences will find the film a pitch-perfect critique of our current American TV culture, while others will say it only further sensationalizes it.

I know, enough with the screenings already. What about the celebs? Well, Stockard Channing and Julia Stiles took questions at their screenings, but they didn't say much and were kinda too far away to see. I thought a guy I passed on the street was the politician Carrie dated briefly on “Sex and the City”—but upon closer inspection, it wasn't him. The most famous face so far that I've just happened to notice? Wallace Shawn, who played schlubby teacher Mr. Hall in “Clueless” (1995) and has reprised the role on the TV series. I know, I'm disappointed too. Where's Drew Barrymore, executive producer of “Donnie Darko,” hiding? Or Samuel L. Jackson, star of “Caveman's Valentine”? And as long as I'm asking, when the heck am I going to down a cosmopolitan with Courtney Love, star of “Julie Johnson”? Guess I've got to be even more serious about my schmoozing. This festival's hard work.

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