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America the dutiful

U.S. indie films concerned with doing right thing
High anxiety is a common theme as festival wraps up

by PETER HOWELL

AUSTIN, Tex.—The sign outside the Austin Fire Department hall seems a tad cautious for these brave parts: "Be Prepared. Always Know Two Ways Out."

Two ways out? Now we have to plan not just our escape, but also our back-up escape? Has the Lone Star State gone completely soft?

But it's definitely a sign of the times. In these jittery pre-war and post-9/11 days of fear, when it seems the only thing between us and nuclear, chemical or biological destruction is a roll of duct tape, our sense of personal security has vanished.

It's a mood in evidence on the screens here at the South by Southwest (SXSW) Film Festival, which concludes its annual nine-day run tomorrow — on the day of a major peace demonstration in the streets of Austin, the capital city of the home state of U.S. President George W. Bush.

Whether by design or subconscious expression — probably a bit of both — the movies of SXSW 2003 reflect the throbbing pulse of an anxious age, something we'll likely see more of at the Cannes and Toronto film festivals.

There are few heroes on the screens here, and virtually none of the Wild West variety. But there are plenty of people at odds with the world.

Call it High Anxiety Cinema, and it unspools in many ways. Brien Burroughs' *Security* and Joe Pierson's *Evenhand* directly address the difficulty of maintaining law and order in a world of encroaching anarchy.

Security, a very black comedy, stars Tim Orr and Bill Lillehammer as two uptight watchmen for a chocolate factory who believe in doing everything by the book. Everyone who comes and goes must be duly logged in, date-stamped and notarized, even the cleaning staff whom the two see on a nightly basis. But they're so busy keeping watch on others they barely notice that their own lives — which includes more than a hint of homoerotic attraction — are passing them by.

Evenhand takes a more serious approach. Inspired by the TV series *C.O.P.S.*, it follows two police officers on patrol in a small Texas town. Officer Rob Francis (Bill Dawes), a recent addition to the force, believes in serving and protecting with all due diligence and respect. His partner Ted Morning (Bill Sage, a Robert Redford lookalike), holds exactly the opposite position. Morning is quick to anger, quick to pull his gun and he scoffs at Francis' naivety, cautioning that it's dangerous to think you can be everybody's friend.

"You want to help people, you arrest them," he says. "That's what you do. You're a cop."

Francis and Morning turn out to be more than just stereotypes, which is what sets the movie apart from such recent similar films as *Dark Blue*, *Narc* and *Training Day*. The two officers are both very human, both striving to come to terms with a world of ever-changing rules.

In Kirven Blount's first feature, *Flowers*, Bill Potter (Justin Hagan) is an unemployed New York actor who just can't seem to