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The Contestant

El Concurante (Spain)

By JONATHAN HOLLAND

A Filmax release of a Lazonafilms, Continental, Nephilim Prods, Filmax Entertainment production, with participation of TVE, TVG. (International sales: Filmax Intl., Barcelona.) Produced by Gonzalo Salazar-Simpson, Xavier Villaverde. Executive producers, Ignacio Salazar-Simpson, Douglas Stuart Wilson, Pancho Casal, Julio Fernandez, Luis Collar. Directed, written by Rodrigo Cortes.

With: Leonardo Sbaraglia, Chete Lera, Myriam Gallego, Luis Zahera, Myriam de Maeztu, Fernando Cayo.

Attacking the avarice of banks is like criticizing a vulture for being hungry, but such is the thematic nut of "The Contestant." In his debut feature, writer-director Rodrigo Cortes fails to take the premise anywhere interesting, but the pic has a madcap, contempo energy that could find it offshore fans -- especially among younger auds who can find art in videoclips and identify with the spirit of rebellion.

Opening scenes are typical of the tricks to come, with the V.O. of a dead man trying to find the right point to enter his own story. History of Economics lecturer Martin (bouncy Leonardo Sbaraglia) wins the biggest TV quizshow prize ever, which includes a mansion. But even as he and g.f. Laura (Myriam Gallego) sit on a beach in Brazil, Martin finds "it's expensive being a millionaire."

Taxes of more than 50% on his winnings convince Martin that, ironically, he'll have to take out a loan and sell back some of his new possessions. He seeks the help of lawyer Pizarro (Luis Zahera), but finds he's on the side of the sharks; he then turns to Marxist economist Figueroa (Chete Lera), who explains, in a sequence which would have made a superb short, that banks are designed to make life hell for all of us. Later, Figueroa convinces Martin to fight back. High-octane visuals feature a battery of digital effects that draw on the helmer's ad-making background, which ironically means the pic's style derives from the same capitalist worldview it's attacking. Effects are stunning from first frame to last, but often to no discernible purpose. Film's quieter, more human moments, of which there are few, come as a relief from the audiovisual frenzy. Sbaraglia dedicates considerable energy and charm to the role of Martin. Other characters are basically parodies, from stony-faced faculty head Carmen

Santillana (Myriam de Maeztu) to Figueroa, who's everyone's idea of what an outmoded Marxist should look and sound like. Often-heavy-rock soundtrack fits the general mood of alienation.

Camera (color), David Azcano; editor, Guillermo Represa, Cortes; music, Victor Reyes; art director, Anton Laguna; sound (Dolby Digital), Sergio Burmann.

Reviewed at Malaga Film Festival (competing), March 16, 2007. Running time: 88 MIN.