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## Losing Ground

Reviewed By Erik Childress

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"Where Good Luck Goes To Die"

★★★★★ (Worth A Look)

**SCREENING AT THE 2005 CINEVEGAS FILM FESTIVAL:** Gambling addiction is probably the saddest amongst all vices and the most true-to-life. Chances are you will always be able to find another drink, but the longer you don't the better chance you'll refrain the urge for one. Gambling, on the other hand, promises a greater reward than getting high. Money. Big cash prizes. Your own personal game show where the upside is tremendous and a bad day can still mean breaking even. But a severe run of bad luck can turnover the two worst words in a gambler's vocabulary - "I'm out". For the characters occupying Bryan Wizemann's *Losing Ground*, those words likely applied some time ago.

No casinos or plush fountains for them. They reside one-by-one into a small, dark bar where the game is video poker, perhaps the biggest losing scam ever invented. You think the tables are rigged? How can you trust a random computerized dealer that is destined to literally only deal a major winning hand every one in a million? Kieran (**Kendall Pigg**) is the bartender of this establishment, keeping the doors locked and buzzing in the regulars trading their game of chance for free drinks.

Michelle (**Eileen O'Connell**) is the pretty young thing who could probably be doing very well in the more sinful parts of the city, but hides her scars behind a big smile and a friendly exterior. Marty (**Monique Vukovic**) is precisely the kind of woman prone to Vegas, sitting alone with her white wine and is likely what Michelle would see in a mirror if it projected her future. James (**Matthew Mark Meyer**) is the loudmouth ballbuster, back just one day after dumping three grand into one of the bar-top machines. He has started seeing another regular whom Kieran cares for, Reagan (**Rhonda Keyser**), probably because like Everest, she's there. And getting the best of beginner's luck, a "cowboy" named Turner (**John Good**).

*Losing Ground*, like its characters, is in no hurry to artificially define where its headed. These folks are anything but fast talkers, but losers of this dementia aren't exactly prone to Mametian rapid-fire wit. Over the real time we witness, the desperation for them to fill the time with the money they've got becomes like a vise-grip, pounding away on the "hold" and "discard" buttons and clinging to superstitions like the bond of waiting out a machine as the ultimate source of wisdom. You can spot a true gambling partner when they criticize you not for losing, but for not winning.

There's not a bad performance in the lot, each fulfilling a sadness and a greater sense of danger that comes with satisfying their craving. But there are two standouts. Kendall Pigg as the soft-spoken bartender, catering to a group of people he'd rather not call his acquaintances is terrific in the way he balances the pathetic nature of his profession with restraining himself enough not to lash out and set them straight. It's a claustrophobic performance that nicely balances the minute area where the light shines on its inhabitants. The other is Eileen O'Connell whose beauty already makes her a big winner, but slides so quickly into a losing streak, she seems to age in front of our very eyes. Her hopelessness as she goes from patron-to-patron quietly begging for money and trying out the "partners" theory is sadder than any junkie since we can see she has her limits.

I always joke with my friends in Vegas by quoting, of all films, *Some Kind of Wonderful*. "To win big you gotta do what? Lose big. What are we doing now? We're losing big." It's pretty funny when you know you have a nice hotel to stay and a plane ride home. It's something else when you reach that air of nothingness being out of money. Wizemann's avoids the staginess of his play as cinematographer Mark Schwartzbard confines the shadows like a trap to which these people and the audience have no escape. We're focused on them. "They're all the same machine," says one, a statement which could easily describe the people as the games they play. Try convincing me that drugs or alcohol are harder to kick when the final words of "you won" can mean so little and carry so little delight. Because we know with some people, it will never last.

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