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Losing Ground

Flick Knows When To Hold 'Em

Starring: Eileen O'Connell, Kendall Pigg, John Good, Matthew Mark Meyer, Monique Vukovic, Rhonda Keyser

Written by: Bryan Wizemann, based on his play

Directed by: Bryan Wizemann



On my 21st birthday, I acquainted myself with the demanding mistress that is casino gambling. Not yet the blackjack maniac I'd become, I spent my afternoon pumping the slots and casino hopping in Atlantic City. At Resorts, I roamed along the crowded rows of slot machines looking for an empty seat. A decrepit looking old woman caught my eye. I saw her throw her hands heavenward in utter disgust, then vacate her machine.

Quickly, I jumped into the seat and played three quarters. The machine rolled its eyes and blinked three sevens. All hell broke loose. The machine went off, and so did the decrepit old woman who, just a minute earlier, had cursed the casino gods and given up. She shuffled to my side, and the flashing light of the slot machine reflected in her wide, accusing eyes.

"That's MY MONEY!" she yelled at me. "I've been feeding that SOB for hours!" The expletives flew, and she was animated enough to get the attention of casino security. I told her, in far less profane fashion, that she was going to have to pry my bucket of quarters from my cold, dead hands. She was willing to do so. Security managed to get the straight razor she pulled from her purse out of her hands just before they took her away.

A similar stroke of luck befalls the mysterious cowboy making his first visit to the video gaming bar that provides the setting for Bryan Wizemann's *Losing Ground*. Turner (John Good) enters the bar and, with his cowboy hat, his good looks and his aura of mystery, arouses the interest and suspicion of the locals. He sits at a video poker machine and, after a few tries, scores big.

On the opposite end of the bar, James (Matthew Mark Meyer) feels a sense of gambler's entitlement. The night before, he sat at that very machine and fed it three grand. When the barkeep Kieran (Kendall Pigg) informs Turner of James' "contribution" to Turner's winnings, Turner offers to buy James a drink in a bar where the booze is complimentary.

As James seethes, Michelle (Eileen O'Connell) views Turner as a means of changing her luck. Michelle believes this is her night to hit four aces. When she runs out of money, she lets her trump card fantasy get the better of her. She saunters over and flirts her way into an uneasy alliance with Turner: if he makes a charitable donation to the Michelle Fund, she'll split her winnings with him.

Also in the bar are Marty (Monique Vukovic), a hardened, seasoned veteran gambler with a perpetually unlit cigarette and a kid in college she hopes a big score will support; and Reagan (Rhonda Keyser), James' current girlfriend and Kieran's former flame. Kieran's constant attention to Reagan infuriates James almost as much as Turner's winnings.

Losing Ground spends 90 minutes in real time with these characters and their sadomasochistic cycle of addiction. The film never leaves the bar, and the cinematography never rises above the level of darkness inherent in its characters' downward spirals. The gamblers utter their dialogue with a realistic sense of desperation, as if any interaction with the other gamblers takes time from their Pavlovian responses to the potential payout their video machines hold. The barkeep toes the line between the cockiness his job requires and the exasperation it returns.

In translating his play to film, Bryan Wizemann avoids the staginess that mars most cinematic adaptations of staged work. The at-times too dark cin-tog evokes a sense of noir that wisely distracts whenever the film gets too mannered. The claustrophobic setting is enhanced by the tight close-ups Wizemann favors; his characters seem trapped under microscope slides on the screen. Despite not having a formal narrative line, Wizemann's screenplay peppers the journey with subtle road signs that clue us into the characters' backstory, flaws and motivation. He is ably supported by his actors, each of whom turn in fine work.

Losing Ground doesn't lead anywhere unexpected. Eventually, Turner lives up to his claim that "I'm not really a cowboy." At the perfect moment, Marty lights her perpetually unlit cigarette. Michelle's slowly fading good looks and growing desperation lead her way over her head. James' night doesn't get any better, and Reagan enjoys the tension she sees between James and Kieran. What makes *Losing Ground* compelling is how Wizemann subtly transcends the clichés of the addiction film. It leads us down a familiar path, but its power is in the journey, not the destination.

If there is one complaint to be had, it's the blatant symbolism of Turner's cowboy motif. It is way too obvious, even down to the character's name. (Has Wizemann seen Nicolas Roeg's *Performance*?) The film's subtle balancing act is almost upset by Turner's final actions, but the film's last line redeems the work with the bitter irony of a Pyrrhic victory. Never have the words "I won" been uttered by a gambler with less joy.

Losing Ground is making the rounds of film festivals. It is well worth seeing if given the chance.

