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## Losing Ground

A Ballast Films production. Produced by Julian Coutts, Bryan Wizemann. Directed, written by Bryan Wizemann, from his stage play.

**With:** Eileen O'Connell, Kendall Pigg, Mark Meyer, Monique Vukovic, Rhonda Keyser, John Good.

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**By DENNIS HARVEY**

**Adapted by the author from his own 2003 off-off-Broadway play, Bryan Wizemann's "Losing Ground" is the kind of actors' vehicle that still smacks of sawdust, the claustrophobic locale and dialogue-driven scenes rendering this translation to film (well, digital vid) superfluous. Even onstage, this microcosm of downtrodden humanity set in a Brooklyn video-poker bar might've seemed too redolent of barstool still-lives, like "The Iceman Cometh" and "The Time of Your Life." Yet on its own, far-from-groundbreaking terms, the downbeat ensemble drama impresses with its gritty realism, low-key dramatic focus and honed performances. Commercial exposure will prove an uphill climb, perhaps aided by fest kudos.**

The usual sparse crew of regulars drift into this former Irish bar one sunny afternoon. Bartender Kieran (Kendall Pigg) keeps a tolerant but cautious eye on these disparate losers, each fervently hoping one stroke of luck will turn everything around: Speed freak Marty (Monique Vukovic) dreams of sending cash to the college-student son she's estranged from; pretty, not-so-bright Michelle (Eileen O'Connell) needs a break to pull her back from the brink of prostitution.

Surly James (Matthew Mark Meyer) frittered away a cool \$3,000 here last night, and doesn't prove a good sport when cowboy-hatted Turner (John Good) arrives to score big at the same machine. Adding more tension is the arrival of James' new girlfriend (Rhonda Keyser), who just happens to be Kieran's old one.

Collective hope sinks a few more degrees, and more humiliations are added to protagonists' tally as day crawls into evening in the cheerless establishment. (Dive interior, a real Brooklyn watering hole, borders at times on too-dark in d.p. Mark Schwartzbard's otherwise competent lensing.) Mercifully, script refrains from spelling out the pathos already quite evident in the setting and the characters' faces. A few terse back stories emerge but, more often, dialogue is credibly focused on strained pleasantries, leaving tragedy easy to read.

Performers, all retained from the original stage production, are uniformly excellent. Their absorbing turns and discreet direction keep the bleak tale from growing too uneventful or monotonous.

Using Morton Feldman's String Quartet #2 (played by Flux Quartet) as occasional musical backing is a stylistic gamble that pays off in lyrical gravitas.

Camera (color, DV), Mark Schwartzbard; editor, Brad Studstrup; music, Trevor DeClerq; production designer, Gaylia Wagner; sound, Brian Bowles; assistant directors, Michelle Markham, Dan Nikkel. Reviewed at Cinequest, San Jose, March 10, 2005. Running time: 90 MIN.