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CineVegas '05 Interview ('Losing Ground' Director Bryan Wizemann)

By Erik Childress

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Director Bryan Wizemann says his film is more of a character study than anything plot based and has always been tough to pitch. Their log line "six people, one bar, one hell of a night." Whenever people ask Bryan what the film's about he generally just says video poker, though the film has little to do with that as well. The film was actually inspired by a very real four-year gambling addiction endured by his mother after she was the victim of an embezzlement which led her to a declaration of bankruptcy. He always wanted to detail what a cross-section of that universe was like, though it was a dark time.

You are adapting the film from your stage play. How difficult was the transition? Did you find yourself trying to avoid the staginess that comes from theatrical productions and are almost always criticized by the film reviewers? How much is lost if you "open up" the intimate setting of the stage?

BRYAN: The adaptation was intentionally strict, so it wasn't that difficult. We were able to work out a few kinks during the stage production, and by retaining the same cast, we were able to leverage all the months of work that went into the play for the film. One thing that audiences responded to in the stage play was the claustrophobia of never leaving the bar, being stuck within a paced and patient downward spiral. We were just as committed to never leave the bar in the film, though I did at one point think about opening it up. I even wrote a few scenes where Marty gets her crystal from a casino friend, Reagan is pleading in a check cashing place, but in the end it's more focused by staying put.

The play was mounted at Tom Noonan's Paradise Theater in New York, and grew out of my studying writing there. Tom is a great teacher and very accessible, his film WHAT HAPPENED WAS was the Sundance winner in 1994. The cast had all worked with Tom before, knew his take on dramatic acting, and I knew I had access to this pool of downtown New York theater actors. I was therefore able to craft the original script around each person who was cast. Luckily they all agreed to do it. As far as staginess, so far the response has been that it goes unnoticed. Film is my background, and even the assistant director of the play, Matthieu Cornillon, would sell the play to friends as a "live movie". We didn't worry about it too much when filming.

When you were 14 years old, if someone asked you what you wanted to be when you grew up, what would your answer have been?

BRYAN: Oh I don't know, I was acting a bit then, in high school I took forensics which took me to competitions and then to nationals with an Eric Bogosian monologue called Our Gang, from his book Drinking In America. That was a strong influence, and I began writing monologues before I tried any longer form dialogue work.

How did you get started in filmmaking?

BRYAN: I jumped in feet first after having written a feature about the punk scene in Vegas. I was twenty years old and still at Cornell at the time, incredibly cocky, and the script attracted other people to be involved. I cast it, borrowed some money, put the rest on credit and we went to Vegas to shoot it. We got about four days into the shoot before any and all manner of production problems, mostly due with how little I actually knew about the trials of film, started to come to the surface. We canceled it, or it got canceled, and I took it hard, basically suffering a nervous breakdown in the process. It was actually a good experience all told, and was a very pointed lesson regarding the problems of ego and perfectionism, especially when trying to hold together a production.



How did you get your film started? How did you go from script to finished product?

BRYAN: Both the play and the film were self-financed. The play opened on the night after we bombed Iraq, so it was difficult to get people away from CNN to come down to East 4th St. Like most theater ventures, we took a loss. We all knew it was a strong production, and we were well reviewed, but lacked the energy and finances to take it to a larger house for an extended run. I was part of a monologue show we later did at the theater working with Rhonda Keyser, and my cigarette breaks were often shared with Brad Studstrup, who was editing Tom Noonan's film WANG DANG at the time. Him and his wife Jody, also an editor, were ardent fans of the play, and we would continue to talk about what the film's realization might look like. He eventually offered to edit it for what can only be described as offensive compensation, the cast all agreed to work toward the film, and we shot it a few months later in October.

When you were in pre-production, did you find yourself watching other great movies in preparation?

BRYAN: I started re-watching bar set, single location and gambling films, though they were little help. My cinematographer, Mark Schwartzbard, sat me down to watch John Huston's *FAT CITY*, which was influential in the film's look and atmosphere. It was the film he was most reminded of after having read the script. His camera work by the way, which often goes unnoticed given that I imposed incredible restrictions on the shoot, was phenomenal. I didn't allow any tracking or moving shots to speak of, as I was more interested in a kind of staid and photographic composition. Mark had the good sense to shoot the thing very bright to get as much information on the DV tape as possible, and then using the deftness of Joe Gawler at Technicolor, it was color-corrected down to be very, very dark. We also move closer in as the film progresses, trying to emphasize an intimacy with otherwise unsympathetic characters. I wanted the film's look to convey that it is both a very realistic investigation into human nature, and also a metaphor for something outside of itself.

Name the three directors working today that you most admire.

BRYAN: That's hard, there are many. I'm inspired by most of the European heavies, Kieslowski, Tarkovsky, Bergman, Truffaut, as well as Mike Leigh, Lynne Ramsay, Erick Zonca, and the Dardenne brothers. Kubrick, Atom Egoyan, David Lynch, Kurosawa, and Cassavetes, all influenced me at different times for different reasons. I usually cite films over directors, Jesus I'm really evading this question, if I had to pick three it would be Kieslowski for all he's done, Ramsay for *RATCATCHER*, and Mike Leigh for making films interested in emotional truth, something I aspire to.

How have things changed for you since your film started playing on the festival circuit? If this is your first acceptance into a film festival, describe what that's like and your thoughts about CineVegas. What are you looking forward to most during your CineVegas experience?

BRYAN: We premiered earlier this year at Cinequest in San Jose, and it was a great experience. The film was readily accepted and screens well with a varied audience, and the Q and A's were very generous. Though we had screened it to friends and other editors for feedback, it was something else to feel the strong responses it would elicit from larger crowds in an actual theater. Oddly enough, I was able to interact with some other New York filmmakers out west, who I'm sure I would never run into here if we didn't meet out there. Matt Zoller Seitz, a film critic for the NYPress, had a feature out there called *HOME* which deals with relationships and reveals some wonderful improvisational acting. Larry Levine showed *TERRITORY*, another New York play adaptation which showcases some great work from Grant Varjas and John Good. John Good plays the interloper "cowboy" in my film, and Brad started to cut Larry's film as we were finishing up, so it was nice to support them both.

CineVegas is real legitimization for our film, and we are very happy to be a part of it. Our film is set in Vegas, in a small phenomenon known as a video-poker bar, which is actually every bar in that town. The film has a lot to say about the addictions of gambling and the kind of desperation that is ever-present in that city, and given that the CineVegas is set in a Casino, I have to commend Trevor Groth and his team for not only programming our otherwise small production, but doing so in such a confident fashion. Other than that, I know what to expect out of Vegas itself, I grew up there.

When you were shooting the film, did you have CineVegas (or any other film festivals in general) in mind?

BRYAN: No. Film is so volatile that any kind of consideration so far ahead would have been presumptive. It was nice to see the film progress on set, and see how the cast and crew changed as we all realized we were making something that had a lot of potential. Having said that, given that our film is so Vegas centric, it would have been hard if they had turned us away.

Have you been turned down by other festivals? If so, which ones and what do you think could be improved with festivals in general.



BRYAN: Have we been tuned down by other fests? Yes. We didn't fare well with any of the "first tier" fests such as Sundance, Toronto, and Berlin. We also didn't get into a few stateside fests where we expected to fare better. It's a bit of a slow starter, and works within a symmetry of introducing the characters that doesn't make sense until their departures are handled, and I think that hurt us at some fests. This theory relying on the assumption that they simply don't have time to fully screen every film, and ours is a slow burn.

We shot the film in Brooklyn at The Gate, a bar which a friend of mine owns, and he was gracious enough to let us take it over for two weeks during the twelve hours when they were closed for business. Given that, we thought that the New York section of Tribeca was a good fit for us, but they went with all world premiere status films this year. New Directors/New Films was also one we were hoping for, but that one is tough just given the high caliber of productions they attract each year. I do think festivals are doing a great job at better defining themselves and the films they would like to show, and this is helping filmmakers strategize a bit. We are lucky to be working with Bob Hawk, who is consulting us on which festivals we should push for and which to potentially avoid.

The festival circuit: what could be improved? What's been your favorite part of the ride?

BRYAN: I don't have any direct ideas for fests in general, so far my experience has been quite good. Meeting others who have also mortgaged themselves into near bankruptcy for their projects has been reassuring, and one can only assume these people will continue to make independent film. We always thought it would be fun to have a festival category based on budget, but that's only because ours was made for so little and that we know we would stand out.

Have you seen any independent films recently on the festival circuit, in theaters or on video that influenced you? Or anything that you would just like to give a shout-out to that audiences should be seeing (or given a chance to see?)

BRYAN: I'm hyper-critical, and it is a hard road at virtually any budget level. I'm looking forward to catching Miranda July's film *ME YOU AND EVERYONE WE KNOW* while at CineVegas. I'm in an MFA program here in New York and have done some conceptual art and video projects for some time, and it's nice to see that someone else can mix those two worlds and be successful doing so. *TWO GREAT SHEEP* is playing fests right now and is lovely, and I can't wait to see *MURDERBALL*. As far as

overlooked films, I always thought Tom Gilroy's *SPRING FORWARD* deserved a wider audience. Also Michael Haneke's *FUNNY GAMES*, perhaps the most psychologically dark film made in some time, is a great example of the implicit in a dialogue-driven work.



What's the one glaring lesson you learned while making this film?

BRYAN: This film was quite positive in its conception, there were a lot of pregnancies going on during the shoot, and we all thought that was a good omen. One thing I always want more of is time. I'm convinced that a great many films suffer under an unrealistic schedule, and often jump off of a character too quickly. I like to make my explorations a bit longer, something akin to sustained observation. It's also a greater challenge as a writer, you're committed to stick around and really flesh out a moment.

If a studio said 'we love this, we love you, you can remake anything in our back catalogue for \$40m' – what film, if any, would you want to remake?

BRYAN: I would take half that and make my own film. I'm incredibly averse to remakes, and can only think of one, Adrian Lyne's *LOLITA*, that had anything additional to offer.

Two parter – name an actor you'd KILL to work with, and then name an actor in your own film that you really think is destined for great things.

BRYAN: I'd like to work with Robin Wright Penn, only because I have a project she would acquit well. I've also always like David Thewlis for his presence. As far as my film it's an ensemble piece, and I hate to single any one of them out. Having said that, I think the two that stand to gain the most from the film's exposure are Eileen O'Connell and Monique Vukovic, it is arguably some of the strongest acting of any five-figure budget film in memory.

At what point will you be able to say, "Yes! I've made it!"

BRYAN: Probably at the point when I'm not below zero in my checking account.

A film is made by many people, including the director (of course), but you'll often see movies that open with a credit that says "a film by..." – Did you use that credit in your film? If so, defend yourself! If not, what do you think of those who do?

BRYAN: I didn't use it in the film, and find it a bit hard to take when I see it in others. I did however use it in the poster, only because I'm trying to forge a career and wanted to highlight that my role was as writer, director and producer. I think films are essentially made for free, and they're made on paper. Without the writer, there is nothing. Writing the film is my first entry point into any project, and is about the best advice I can give anyone who wants to make films.

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Losing Ground (written and directed by Bryan Wizemann) - starring **Eileen O'Connell, Kendall Pigg, Matthew Mark Meyer, Monique Vukovic, Rhonda Keyser, John Good** and **Colm Byrne** will screen at the 2005 CineVegas Film Festival on **Thursday, June 16 at 4:00 PM** and again on **Friday, June 17 at 1:30 PM**.

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