

# **The WAGER, Vol. 8, Editorial, Special Feature Film Editorial and Forum for: Owing Mahowny**

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Distributed by: Sony Pictures Classics. Cast: Philip Seymour Hoffman (Dan Mahowny), Minnie Driver (Belinda), John Hurt (Victor Foss), Maury Chaykin (Frank Perlin), Jason Blicher (Dave Quinson), Chris Collins (Bernie), Roger Dunn (Bill Gooden), Matthew Ferguson, Sonja Smits (Dana Selkirk), Ian Tracey (Detective Ben Lock). Directed by: Richard Kwietniowski. Screenwriters: Maurice Chauvet and Richard Kwietniowski.

Welcome to a special editorial brought to you by The WAGER and The Massachusetts Council on Compulsive Gambling. Owing Mahowny is based on the true story of a Toronto bank manager with two problems: he's a gambler, and his job gives him free control of a \$20 million account. Within 18 months, he whittles the fortune down to just \$8 million... this is the story of how he did it. The movie is based on the book by Gary Ross, *Stung: The Incredible Obsession of Brian Molony*. We will be publishing a movie review and reactions to the film from various contributors on May 14, 2003. Everybody is welcome to submit comments and reactions to the film. Please send your comments to [wager@hms.harvard.edu](mailto:wager@hms.harvard.edu). By submitting an article to us, you agree to let us review the article, and edit it if necessary for possible inclusion in this page. Thank you for your contributions.

Owing Mahowny is the story of a young manager at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. At age twenty-four he was assistant manager of a major branch in the heart of Toronto's financial district. On the outside, he appeared as a shy, workaholic, humorous man. The truth was that he embezzled over \$10 million from his bank to finance his gambling obsession. As Brian Mahowny, Philip Seymour Hoffman delivers a complex and layered performance. His character is constantly tormented and his internal turmoil is physically expressed by Hoffman with an economy of movement and expression. The film suffers from the

oversimplification and naïveté of the characters surrounding Mahowny. The casino managers seem to be surprised and confused by an ostensibly problem gambler, as though they have never encountered anything quite like it before. As Belinda, Brian's girlfriend, Minnie Driver seems a bit flat, perhaps due to the limited development of her character.

Pathological gambling is a serious problem, and the question remains whether Philip Seymour Hoffman (or anyone) can convincingly play such a complex issue. Due to the nature of the problem, and the different circumstances that allow for such pathology to flourish, any one portrayal of problem gambling will be by definition incomplete. Gambling affects each person in a different way, and each individual who manifests symptoms due to uncontrolled problem gambling or even substance use will be different. With that in mind, the film offers us a fascinating glimpse at one particular case that changed the face of gambling forever.

— Gabriel Caro

Owning Mahowny accurately depicts many facets of problem (compulsive) gambling that I identified with my own real-world gambling experience. Such factors include: extensive scheming acts to get money; facing increasing financial pressures stemming from gambling losses; lack of focus with personal relationships or other people outside of the gambling world, etc.

Owning Mahowny identifies the progressive nature of this disease in a manner consistent with my own gambling experience. The increased level and frequency of betting, regardless of the form, whether at casinos or sports betting, throughout the movie is an accurate portrayal of the problem gambler. The protagonist's denial that he has a gambling problem, but rather a "financial problem," accurately portrays a compulsive gambler who is not willing or able to face the nature of this disease.

In my opinion, the manner in which Brian static emotion during times of winning is not altogether realistic for the compulsive gambler. While he was making his big score in Las Vegas, he never showed excitement and euphoria. Dan remained emotionless throughout his gaming action regardless of wins/losses. A typical compulsive gambler might not remain somber during a big roll. On the other hand, there was no display of irritability or anger from Brian consistent with compulsive gamblers who experience a losing streak.

In summary, on a scale of 1 - 10, 10 reflecting the highest level of accuracy in the life of a compulsive gambler, I rate this film 8.5. Problem gamblers often exhibit

behavior consistent with depression and anger, while winning phases bring about tremendous feelings of euphoria and power. This film doesn't display these swings of emotions. However, the film does do a good job of portraying the constant struggle and vigilance over finances while in action and brings a very good sense of what the life of a compulsive gambler goes through while in action.

— Anonymous

Owning Mahowny works both as film depicting the true story of a banker who is a compulsive gambler and a cautionary tale about the addictive qualities of gambling. This film also presents a striking contrast between the world of the compulsive gambler and the happy gamblers depicted by ubiquitous casino TV commercials. The actors in the TV commercials appear to be having the times of their lives, while Mahowny never smiles or laughs at the gambling tables. Casino staff refers to him as the Iceman. The object of his attention never waivers, although he is presented with many potentially desirable distractions. The viewer is left to muse and interpret Mahowny's motivation, thoughts, and feelings.

Owning Mahowny is not just the story of the lead character's life while in the middle of the action, but the stories of those around him in a parallel process. This includes his sports bookie, a woman with a start up company, casino staff, and finally his fellow bank officers. Most of the characters in this film appear energized when in action while characters not affected by the gambling action and chase are left without a clue to the attractions of gambling. Owning Mahowny may be the best film that portrays the world of the compulsive gambler and may provide an enriched understanding of this problem to the general film audience, family members of those afflicted, and the helping professionals.

— Robin A. Chapman, Psy. D.

Owning Mahowny, the new film starring Phillip Seymour Hoffman as Dan Mahowny, a banker with a gambling problem, is appropriately tense for its subject matter. Mahowny appears always on edge as he shifts money at the bank to get cash to fund his gambling and pay for his gambling debts, as he decides to go to Atlantic City rather than home, as he goes through customs with thousands of dollars in undeclared cash, and as he gives in to his urges at the craps table. To watch him go through millions of dollars in a matter of filmic minutes is excruciating. Even when he is up, Mahowny is a picture of anxiety, sweaty and preoccupied. In fact, given all his external signals, it really is a wonder that it takes half the movie before anyone notices that there is something amiss.

Consistent with many addictive behaviors, Mahowny shows signs of tolerance in

that he needs to place ever-higher bets to achieve a high. However, in this portrayal, it is unclear whether that high ever existed. Mahowny's affect is as flat when he is winning as it is when he is losing. The viewer never witnesses the thrill that he is seeking, and this is one of the shortcomings of the film. Mahowny's statements about the excitement he gets from gambling are inconsistent with the film's portrayal of his gambling experience.

The film does a better job in its dispassionate portrayal of its subject. Mahowny is neither hero nor villain, and his character may elicit the viewer's sympathy or repulsion (or both), depending upon the viewer's own experience. This neutrality works well in the film's treatment of Mahowny, but falls flat when applied to his girlfriend, Belinda, played by Minnie Driver. Belinda is potentially the most sympathetic character in the film, as she is arguably the one most hurt by Mahowny's behavior, but the audience is never made to understand her. Rather than coming across as someone truly suffering as she tries to hold together a difficult relationship, Belinda just seems pathetic and unbelievable.

Whether or not its representation of gambling problems is accurate, *Owning Mahoney* will be compelling viewing for anyone with an interest in this complex issue. It may also appeal to a broader audience of those who enjoy movies about casinos, heists, and the underworld.

— Clare Bruff-Graves

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