

An obsession, and not much more

Owning Mahowny, directed by Richard Kwietniowski

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The film *Owning Mahowny* is based loosely on the true story of an assistant bank manager/gambling addict chronicled in Gary Ross's 1987 book *Stung: The Incredible Obsession of Brian Molony*. Molony embezzled more than \$10 million from the Toronto bank where he worked in the 1980s to fuel his gambling obsession, traveling to Atlantic City and Las Vegas, betting millions of dollars at a time.

Dan Mahowny (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is a disheveled, dull figure with greasy, unkempt hair who generally bores his bank associates and acquaintances. He has a somewhat perky, yet almost equally boring, girlfriend Belinda (Minnie Driver), a bank teller, who for some unknown reason dotes upon him. They are making plans to move in together—a prospect that seems to excite Belinda and somewhat irritate Dan.

In fact, little interests Mahowny aside from gambling. He has been betting since the age of 12, sticking mostly to sports and horses. But not too far into the film, he begins to slip deeper and deeper into debt with his bookie Frank Perlin (Maury Chaykin). Mahowny, however, worries less about his growing debt and more about the prospect that he might be cut off from his obsessive behavior. He begins to steal thousands and then millions of dollars from real and imaginary bank patrons' accounts at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce to fund his gambling addiction.

He flies to Atlantic City, and later Las Vegas, for 48-hour gambling jags. Atlantic City casino operator Victor Foss (John Hurt) knows a money-maker when he sees one and works to cultivate Mahowny's obsession. The Hurt character plies Mahowny with perks reserved for high rollers—gourmet food and liquor, a luxury suite, call girls—but Mahowny is interested in none of it. All he wants is “ribs, no sauce,

and a coke,” and unlimited access to the gambling tables. In the course of one night's gambling he wins—then loses—\$9 million.

The “house of cards” does in the end come tumbling down. Mahowny's bank embezzlement is discovered after long-term surveillance by Canadian law enforcement of Mahowny's bookie, and the bank manager is sent away to prison. We see him in both the opening and closing scenes as a recovering problem gambler, discussing his addiction with a counselor.

The problem with film, however, is that we learn very little about what drives this addiction, an obsession that ultimately takes over his life and leads to his professional and personal collapse. The filmmaker gives us few clues as to what in Mahowny's personal life or psychological makeup—or the more general prevailing social atmosphere—might contribute to this behavior.

The only sources of information about the inner-workings of Mahowny's addicted psyche are repeated images of Hoffman's sweaty brow and shots of him sitting in prolonged agony in his dilapidated car in the bank parking lot or at the airport, or as he places his bets at the gambling table.

We are given no hints about his family background, how he ended up in his low-level bank management job, or why he and Belinda are attracted to each other. Minnie Driver isn't given much to do but practice her Canadian accent and play the role of the classic enabler. There is no real tension between these two characters—she continues to believe in him and he persists in disappointing her.

Dan Mahowny works at a bank in Toronto in the 1980s. But little—aside from a few bad hairstyles—gives us an indication of the period: the beginnings of a financial upswing that would lead into the economic

boom of the 1990s. The filmmaker has seemingly gone out of his way to paint the scenery as generically as possible.

There are a few performances and moments in *Owning Mahowny* that provide glimpses into the personal conflicts between the film's characters and the social phenomenon of gambling. John Hurt is excellent as the sleazy casino owner, ingratiating himself with Mahowny in order to suck the lifeblood out of him, abusing his employees, scheming against his Las Vegas casino counterparts—and generally reveling in it all.

Chris Collins plays young casino kitchen worker Bernie, who befriends Mahowny in a casino stairwell after one of his big losses. Owner Foss orders Bernie to tail Mahowny around the casino to encourage his continued gambling. In one of the film's only poignant moments, when Mahowny has racked up \$9 million in winnings, Bernie urges him to walk away—advice sure to cost him his job.

In a scene in Las Vegas, we get a sense of the all-powerful hold gambling has on those suffering from addiction. Dan takes Belinda on a weekend getaway with the objective of earning back his gambling debt. She naïvely believes he has whisked her away to a romantic locale to propose marriage. She waits in the hotel room all night for him, finally dozing off. When she awakes in the morning, she goes to the casino in search of Dan and finds him engrossed in high-stakes gambling. When she tries to speak with him, he shows no remorse and coldly asks her to step away from the table.

Maury Chaykin gives an unsterotypical performance as the bookie Frank Perlin. As Mahowny sinks deeper and deeper into debt, Perlin hedges on allowing him to continue betting with him, saying even bookies have standards. He lends a human face to the world of gambling, projecting what approaches concern for one of the victims of his operation. Of course, this doesn't stop him from eventually taking Mahowny's money and placing more of his debts.

Unfortunately, such moments are rare. One leaves *Owning Mahowny* with little understanding of why the fictional Dan Mahowny became consumed by gambling or why others become problem gamblers.

As in the United States, gambling in Canada is hugely lucrative big business. One recent study estimates that Canadians spend \$20 billion to \$27 billion annually on

legalized forms of gambling. This includes betting at casinos, raffles, bingo and provincial lotteries, and does not take into account off-track betting and other illegal forms of gambling.

While the real-life Brian Molony—the biggest bank embezzler in Canadian history—was clearly in a league of his own, like other problem gamblers his addiction was shaped by the heavy influence of gambling as big business, intersecting with circumstances of his private life and personality.

Owning Mahowny, however, leaves the viewer with the impression that such forms of obsession are unexplainable, or at best the result of faulty brain chemistry. The film seems to go out of its way to say that obsession is just that—obsession. This doesn't really tell us very much.



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