

# Bryan Wizemann's *You Mean Everything to Me*: Confusing love with ownership

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*Written and directed by Bryan Wizemann*

In *You Mean Everything to Me*, the new film by American writer-director Bryan Wizemann that is set in New York City, Cassandra (Morgan Saylor) finds herself in a difficult predicament.

When we first meet her, knocking on the door of her sister Roxanne (Lindsay Burge), she has just left a boyfriend. There were problems. "I should have been more involved in the finances," she understatedly admits. Cassandra needs to stay at her sister's "for a little while." She dreams about opening a women's clothing store.

Living with Roxanne doesn't work out either. Now essentially homeless, facing the possibility of having to sleep in her car, Cassandra encounters the aggressive and persuasive Nathan (Ben Rosenfield), a local DJ, at a bar. They hit it off. It doesn't take long for him to declare, "You're the best girl" and "I'll do anything for you." The latter turns out to have threatening implications.

Nathan begins to take over Cassandra's life. He more or less forces her to quit her restaurant job. Eventually, he convinces her to dance at the seedy club where he provides the music. Her job is to entice customers to buy drinks. The work has a sordid aspect, and things take a turn considerably for the worse when Nathan encourages Cassandra to sleep with another club employee, perhaps to help his career. Afterward he tells her, "It was really hard for me," and then further isolates her from family and friends.

One thing leads to another. Cassandra needs to take dramatic action to remove herself from the increasingly volatile, potentially dangerous situation.

There are important aspects of *You Mean Everything to Me* that ring true: the generally impoverished social and cultural surroundings, the straitened circumstances

of a generation (in their mid- to late 20s) at loose ends in numerous ways, the intense physical and psychic coldness that New York's streets present to the destitute or near-destitute.

Wizemann makes an effort to portray contemporary life accurately and honestly. In a 2011 interview with the WSWs for his film *About Sunny* (entitled *Think of Me* at the time), the writer-director asserted that "emotional truth and social truth are something I am always going to aspire to." There is no reason to doubt his sincerity.

The WSWs explained that Wizemann's earlier film recounted a few days in the life of Angela Jacobs (Lauren Ambrose), "a single mother in Las Vegas struggling to keep her head above water. Angela works in a call center, resides in a shabby apartment with her young daughter Sunny (Audrey Scott), and lives, as the production notes suggest, 'one paycheck away from complete desperation.'" In the end, Angela is approached by a childless couple who want Sunny to "come live with them, permanently. The couple is prepared to pay a great deal of money for the opportunity to give Sunny a better life. The offer throws Angela into a deeper crisis."

*About Sunny/Think of Me* is a stronger film, with its focus on the dreadful things that people can be forced to consider doing under fierce, constant economic pressure.

In *You Mean Everything to Me*, Wizemann takes a step backward. The concentration has shifted, in the direction of Nathan's manipulations and coercions. Behind that, one senses the gravitational pull of various trends and campaigns that have dominated the headlines over the past several years.

The writer-director told *Filmmaker* magazine, "Around the time I was writing this, the stories of Evan

Rachel Wood and Marilyn Manson, FKA Twigs and Shia Labeouf came out,” both involving alleged abuse. “For the men there seems to be a personality type—they’re a little sociopathic and controlling,” he went on. “They confuse love with ownership.”

Wizemann told another interviewer that *You Mean Everything to Me* “is a less a film about one woman’s descent into prostitution than what happens when a giver meets a taker, when a vulnerable young woman who has been conditioned to live for others encounters a narcissist incapable of empathy.”

He also explained that he had researched coercive relationships. “The sad fact,” Wizemann said, “is that the transition from a somewhat normal relationship to prostitution seems incredibly quick. ... I still don’t understand what in the human condition leads to this, but by dramatizing one specific fictional case, I was hoping to get closer to some understanding.”

There are undoubtedly mysterious features of the human condition, but paying close attention to the social processes that determine its overall course is a good starting point. Wizemann is sufficiently thoughtful and socially aware to place Cassandra in economically hazardous conditions, but then suggests that individual psychological “vulnerability” is the central issue. It may be in this or that case, including among wealthy celebrities, but the *principal* source of domestic abuse, prostitution and other social miseries is overwhelmingly economic—poverty, precarious employment, harsh working conditions, low wages, unaffordable housing, all of which have been sharply worsened by the pandemic. The new film sidesteps that “social truth.” The result, despite (or because of) the occasional histrionics, is something artistically and dramatically less compelling, less urgent, secondary.

In December, Wizemann wrote: “Whenever I point folks toward a film I’ve made, I almost always feel like I have to apologize for it in advance. I know not everyone looks forward to a kind of realism that explores poverty, or addiction, or exploitation.” Of course, he has no reason to apologize for “a kind of realism.” On the contrary. But, in *You Mean Everything to Me*, Wizemann has been slightly blown off course by the concerns that dominate in current artistic circles.

The great problem in America and everywhere else is not the small-time manipulator, who may only be a few, or perhaps zero, degrees from being a social

victim himself, but the billionaire oligarchs who profit from the entirety of the brutal social and economic setup.

Nonetheless, Wizemann remains an artist to keep an eye on.



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