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***Owning Mahowny* (2003): Fiction no match for the reality of gambling**

Chris Irwin

Affiliation: IT World Canada, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, E-mail: cirwin@itworldcanada.com

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For correspondence: Chris Irwin, Strategic Account Manager, IT World Canada Inc., 55 Town Centre Court, Suite 302, Toronto, ON M1P 4X4 Canada, (416) 290-0240 x580, E-mail: cirwin@itworldcanada.com
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Successfully balancing family (and film viewing) priorities, Chris Irwin's career-to-date has covered "large C" Communications (sales/marketing, internal communications, writing/translating and public relations) in corporate and not-for-profit environments. In addition to Gary Ross' introduction, a highlight of the Responsible Gambling Council conference movie screening was seeing *Owning Mahowny* on an actual "screen," a rarity for this father of three!

The Responsible Gambling Council (Ontario) screened *Owning Mahowny* in late September as part of its Discovery 2003 conference. Perhaps due in part to its limited release, many attendees had not yet seen the film. As an added bonus for the event, the council arranged an introductory talk by Gary Stephen Ross, author of *Stung: The incredible obsession of Brian Molony* (1987), the non-fiction account upon which the movie is based.

As the writer, researcher, and consultant on the movie, Ross had some fascinating insights to share:

"People always ask me if I like the movie," he began, "Well, it's not the kind of movie that you really 'like.'" *Owning Mahowny* is far from a "feel-good flick," and Ross went on to recount some of his experiences from the set. The movie's lead, Philip Seymour Hoffman, shut himself in a room with the real Brian Molony, and

“completely absorbed” the characteristics and mannerisms of his subject. Ross described some of the physical resemblances between actor and subject, but emphasized the extent to which Hoffman replicated Molony's idiosyncrasies. (Hoffman may become a master of mannerism of the same league as DeNiro's physical chameleonism.) Ross also shared how Minnie Driver's girlfriend-of-the-gambler role related to her real-life experiences with an ex-boyfriend.

My interest in this movie spans business and pleasure: I then worked at the Responsible Gambling Council, and I have always enjoyed film. (Reviewer's caveat: to the detriment of my objectivity, I remain convinced that Philip Seymour Hoffman can do no wrong.)

The story intrigued me, as do many of the issues around gambling. The mild-mannered reclusive bank manager Dan Mahowny, played by Hoffman, racks up unauthorized borrowings (*embezzled funds* seems so strong for such a nice guy!) of more than \$10 million. The police interrogation brings out the ripping irony that Mahowny's “luck” in stealing money enabled him to attain such an astronomical sum!

Hoffman is best known for supporting roles, and this is his first time playing the lead in a film. He excels in subtlety, and *Owning Mahowny* was a perfect forum for Hoffman to stage his specialty in a central capacity. The entire film is an examination of the psyche of a man who is normal and boring in almost every way, except that he is a compulsive gambler. To borrow from the observations of elated casino manager Victor Foss, played by John Hurt, Dan Mahowny is a “purist.”

Two pivotal scenes in the movie demonstrate the subtlety with which Hoffman masterfully conveys sheer human emotion:

Scene 1 (The beginning of the end)

Mahowny sits at his desk having just had a visit from his bookie. His very unwanted visitor demanded settlement and now waits on the parking level for \$10,400; Mahowny says he needs a few minutes.

In a scene that unfolds over an eternity of tight shots that alternate from blank loan application to furrowed brow, Mahowny “creates” a client who will “borrow” the necessary funds. His face, his breathing, his fiddling with his pen all paint the picture of a man who sees his solution, and ever so slowly prepares himself to follow it through.

Scene 2 (A close call)

Mahowny stands in an elevator with his boss and his boss's superior on the way to visit the wealthy father of Mahowny's biggest client. The bank has uncertainties

around an overextended credit limit; Mahowny has skimmed over \$3 million from the account.

The ride in the elevator likens to a walk toward the gallows: the truth will come out; the deceit will be exposed. the pressure is unbearable. Nonchalantly, the senior boss reveals his strategy for the meeting: the bank will leverage the overextension to pressure the father into personally securing his daughter's debt. His direction to “not mention any numbers” in the meeting is the most obvious break to go Mahowny's way. Hoffman, again with utter subtlety, exudes the bitter sweetness of knowing that this journey is not over. not just yet.

In conclusion, I confess to liking this movie. These are two scenes that stand out, but Hoffman's performance is superb from beginning to end. More than entertaining, this film is gripping. *Owning Mahowny* is another example of the notion that fiction is no match for the wackiness of reality, which points to the work of a fellow Seymour Hoffman fan, Paul Thomas Anderson, whose movie *Magnolia* declares:

“There are stories of coincidence and chance, of intersections and strange things told, and which is which and nobody knows; and we generally say, ‘Well, if that was in a movie, I wouldn't believe it.’”

References

Ross, G.S.. (1987) *Stung: The incredible obsession of Brian Molony*. Toronto: Stoddart.