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***Dreamland* (2000): Personal gambling stories add depth to academic approach**

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Dreamland, (2000), U.S.A., Director: Lisanne Skyler, Producer: Greg Little, Runtime: 57-minute (this review) and 71-minute versions are available, Distributor: First Run /Icarus Films, Inc. 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn, NY, U.S.A. 11201, telephone: (718) 488 8900 / (800) 876 1710, fax: (718) 488 8642, e-mail: mailroom@frif.com, Web: <http://www.frif.com>.

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William N. Thompson, (PhD, political science, University of Missouri) is professor of public administration at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas . He wrote *Legalized gambling: A reference handbook* (1994,1997) and *Native American issues* (1996). He co-authored: *Over the top: Solutions to the Sisyphus dilemmas of life* (2003), *Gambling in America: An encyclopedia* (2001), *Crime and casinos in Wisconsin* (1996), *The social cost of gambling in Wisconsin* (1996), *The economic impact of Native American casinos in Wisconsin* (1995), *Casino customer service = The WIN WIN game* (1992, 1996), *International casino law* (1991, 1999). He and John Dombrink were consultants to the President's Commission on Organized Crime. They wrote *The last resort: Success and failure in campaigns for casinos* (1990). Dr. Thompson is widely published in scholarly gambling journals, has testified as an authority on gambling, is widely quoted in the news media, and has served internationally as a gambling consultant.

The film *Dreamland* offers perhaps the most personal assessment to date of the elements of problem gambling. It is on target all the way. It should be

recommended to students of the subject but also to therapists and to the victims of problem gambling who are struggling to find the answers to guide them toward recovery.

The film goes to the Mecca of gambling, Las Vegas. There it takes an up-close look at three residents who have developed serious gambling problems. The commentary could come right from problem gambling textbooks, but its strength is that it comes from the lips of real people.

Dreamland was filmed over a two-year period in the late 1990s. It examined, through vignettes, the three gamblers and eight of their acquaintances. It is difficult to discern if the filming was staged or if the time lapses were genuine in all cases. The effect this viewer received was that the subjects were followed over the time of the filming. The vignettes of the three are mixed with each other and with those of other people. There is no formula presented for guiding the viewer. The scenes and stories allow a poignant interpretation of gambling experiences. The film yields great insights into motivations for gambling, coping mechanisms for inevitable losses, and the quest for finding “solutions” for gambling problems. All three make the ultimate choice to stop gambling, and two are guided to recovery through Gamblers Anonymous groups.

The subjects' narratives provide substance for anyone wishing to learn about human behavior. The three lead characters are Lou, Dorothy, and Carol. All moved to Las Vegas from some distance away. The two women are employed single mothers. Lou is a retired tailor from Los Angeles who must keep working because of his gambling losses. All face loneliness in their private lives as well as other stressors. Gambling becomes an effective source of relief from their loneliness and stress.

Dorothy recalled that she had friends in her hometown, but that Las Vegas was different and she felt “left out.” When she gambled she forgot about her loneliness and her bills and debts, which were mostly caused by gambling. In the casino she found that the machines were the “happiness” of her life. She felt good when she won and she felt good when she lost. She called her machine her “iron pimp” and commented that “the machine talks to me.” Dorothy recalled with pride how she had only \$20 one Christmas Eve. Fearing her children would not have an enjoyable Christmas, she ventured to the casino and won \$520. The day was saved.

Lou felt comfortable at the Horseshoe Casino in downtown Las Vegas. They gave him coffee, meals, and cigarettes. “What more does one need?” he asked. The 75-year-old recalled that he felt he was 29 when he was gambling. He was young again. At the tables, blackjack was “his game” and he was critical of “ignorant” tourists who would laugh and carry on as if play was not serious business. For Lou

it was very serious. He considered himself a “card counter” and gambling was work, between him and the dealer. He completely cut himself off from all other players and his surroundings. However, he remained aware that he could switch tables and get extra packs of free cigarettes, and that eight hours of play allowed him to have a “free” meal.

Lou was rather cerebral in his analysis of gambling. He looked for patterns, but his comments belied intelligent observations. He told about how he won a lot of money and then lost it the next day. His conclusion: “I have to lose before I can win.” He kept track of his losses and when he felt that a table was going against him, he knew it was time to quit. He would go have a cup of coffee, and then he would return to another table. In fact the casino knew that he was a “table jumper,” a “rabbit.” With 55 tables, there had to be a lucky table somewhere. He recalled his fondest memory with laughter. Once he started with \$200 and gambled it down to \$10. He announced to the table that he was going to win his money back and leave with \$100 in his pocket. And he did just that.

Carol never played table games, because she did not want people to think that she did not know what she was doing. After trying several types of machines, she discovered video poker machines, which gave her instructions each step of the way. As a working single mother, she had great stress in her life. However, she found that all her feelings were suspended at the poker machines. Life was fun when she was playing. Then she discovered that she could not stop playing. She began to neglect her children and she gambled away her rent money even while facing an eviction order.

The members of the supporting cast included Arnold and Ella. Arnold gambled because it reminded him of times his father took him to the arcades when he was a child. Now he didn't have to gamble only pennies. He could gamble large sums of money and he never had to go home. The couple did caution viewers to be skeptical about all stories of players claiming that they won. “They never say how much they lost, before they had their big win.”

Milton is a cab driver who once had a problem. Now he just gamblers “recreationally”— only on sports parlay cards. He stays away from craps because he can lose control too fast. His son David has been a dealer at several casinos. Once he was reprimanded for suggesting that a player who had lost too much quit. He never did that again. While David watched others experiencing gambling passions, he himself once got into an argument with his girlfriend and took his frustration to the blackjack tables. He lost \$7000 at one sitting. He quit gambling.

Lem Banker is a noted authority on sports gambling. He made a successful career analyzing the odds and playing games in a highly calculated way. He also is paid for his advice, offering his picks to the public. He finds winning to be difficult and

slow. He is a self-proclaimed tortoise in his race to success. He admires his parents and a grandfather who came to America from Russia and gambled on the American Dream by working hard and developing a business that supported ten children.

Joan is a casino dealer and reformed alcoholic. She is not a gambler, but she advises fellow dealers when they need to stop and get help. Joe is Lou's boss at a tailor shop. He cautions that a person in Las Vegas with a family and a business does best not to gamble at all. Robert Hunter, one of the world's most renowned gambling therapists, advises that there is a big difference between recreational or social gamblers and problem gamblers. Social gamblers do not borrow money to gamble, and they do not allow gambling to interfere with financial or time obligations to families and friends. He laments that the old Vegas is gone. In the old Vegas, local residents were warned not to gamble. The city now has a set of casinos that market specifically to local residents and even the 7-11s and supermarkets have slot machines. While Joan and Carol try to advance the notion that Las Vegas is in most ways "just like any other city," that viewpoint is roundly challenged by David and by Robert Hunter.

The three main players reached a bottom stage in their gambling behavior. Their roller coaster rides recall accounts from Henry Lesieur's classic *The Chase: Career of the compulsive gambler*. One player gave serious consideration to suicide; all came to a financial dead end. Lou resisted Gamblers Anonymous because he was reluctant to talk to strangers. Dorothy made a shy entrance to a group meeting and after several meetings opened up and admitted her need for the help of a higher power. Carol had actually quit gambling in 1990 using the power of GA. She is now actively helping other problem gamblers and advises casinos how they can help.

There is a large body of serious literature on problem gambling. Unfortunately, while it should be widely disseminated, much of it is written in an academic style that causes it to be overlooked. *Dreamland* puts flesh and bone, muscle and blood on the academic treatments given to this important topic. This film is a vitally needed vehicle that can bring a needed dose of reality about problem gambling to wide audiences. I recommend it for all.

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