

'Croupier' Puts New Twist on Heist Plot

By Allison Rost
Staff Writer

To be a croupier is to walk a fine line: you take bets at the craps table or deal blackjack to the rich and powerful, and even with security cameras watching you from every angle, the temptation to slip one more chip to a wealthy patron can be overwhelming.

In "Croupier," Jack Manfred, a struggling novelist, takes a night job as a croupier in London to support himself and pay his girlfriend, Marion, months of back rent.

This glamorous flick has a lot going for it — an intriguing plot and a great cast.

It's one of those movies you want to watch again to see if you can pick up the hints dropped along the way.

Jack's previous experience as a croupier makes him wary of falling back down a treacherous slope. Despite his best efforts to stay clean, though, he starts to slip.

Things get worse when Jani, a South African socialite, asks him to help her with a heist scheme to get creditors off her back. Will he or won't he?

The storyline is definitely the film's strongest point. Tightly written, the screenplay by Paul Mayersburg ("The Man Who Fell to Earth") takes us through Jani's planned heist and beyond, culminating in several unexpected twists that leave you gasping for air and laughing at the irony at the same time.

There are a few minor plot points that the film might have explained more thoroughly just for curiosity's sake, such as the question of why Jack was a croupier in the past and what happened to make him such a skeptic, but none of that missing information really makes a difference.

There's another blip with the choice of Clive Owen to play Jack. He has such potential, and while he makes Jack believable, no emotion is really evident until the end. While it is appropriate there, it would have been nice to see it elsewhere.

Luckily, he's surrounded by great

actresses. Gina McKee and Alex Kingston are wonderful as Marion and Jani, respectively.

McKee, previously known for his role in "Notting Hill," is heartbreaking as the spurned Marion.

ER's Kingston is especially effective, and in this role, there isn't a shade of her television role Dr. Corday.

What with all the casino heist movie remakes currently in the works, such as "Ocean's Eleven," "Croupier" should be regarded as the epitome of the narrow subgenre.

It's short — only an hour and a half — but from the first frame of a spinning roulette wheel, it sucks you in. Director Mike Hodges sets stylish shots of London city life to Jack's narrations of chapters of his novel.

Ultimately the film proves hypnotic and addictive, kind of like gambling itself.

After all, as Jack says at one point with a sly grin, "I have the power to make you lose."

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Teenage Rolling Stone Reporter's Life Makes Great Story in 'Almost Famous'

By Justin Winters
Staff Writer

"The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what we share with someone else when we're uncool."

This quote stuck with me days after seeing writer/director Cameron Crowe's "Almost Famous," the year's most touching, honest, and thoroughly entertaining film — one that uses rock 'n' roll as a perfect framework for presenting its main themes of life, love and growing up dazed and confused.

"Famous" tells the remarkably authentic story of a 15-year-old (newcomer Patrick Fugit) who is given the Rolling Stone magazine dream job (circa 1973) of shadowing a genuine rock 'n' roll band named Stillwater.

The story is a fictionalized account of Crowe's awe-inspiring youth, spent taking road trips with legendary bands such as Led Zeppelin and the Allman Brothers.

Stillwater's "almost famous" group members include the charismatic gui-

tarist Russell Hammond (UNC alumnus Billy Crudup) and the humorously outspoken lead singer Jeff Bebe (Jason Lee). William ends up losing his young heart to a groupie (or Band-Aid, as they wish to be called) named Penny Lane (Kate Hudson) while keeping his concerned mother (Frances McDormand) calling to check in every minute from home.

Crowe, undoubtedly one of the best young directors in his craft, hasn't only created a movie that will speak to every viewer, young and old — he has committed to celluloid an experience that cons you into being melodramatically nostalgic, compels you to listen to old LPs with the lights off, and handily whips you into walking out of the theater with your eyes wide open.

His screenplay, and his direction of it, uses subtleties to make you smile and tear up as it becomes impossible not to empathize with the characters, who literally jump off the screen.

The movie's superb soundtrack, featuring gems such as Simon & Garfunkel's "America" and Elton John's "Tiny Dancer," keeps you singing along silently in your seat.

With an uncanny but spooky brilliance, Fugit embodies all that Crowe

was back in 1973, a wide-eyed boy still searching for "something real," a cause to cling to in order to define himself. It is frightening how much emotion the young actor can convey through his eyes, and Crowe wisely dwells upon that fact.

Hudson, daughter of actress Goldie Hawn, is so talented and beautiful in this breakout role that you feel jealous that she has such good genes.

Crudup and Lee provide most of the laughs for the film, but counter brilliantly with some very poignant moments. McDormand and Phillip Seymour Hoffman, who plays rock guru Lester Bangs, give Oscar-deserving performances without even trying.

Is the movie that good? To put it best, "Famous" is so good that, optimistically, it could start a trend of more personal filmmaking. Crowe followed the time-honored tradition of "write what you know" and hit a homer in the bottom of the ninth that knocked me off my rocker.

Thanks, Cameron. I can't wait to see what's next.

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4. Caitlin Cary - Waltzie (Yep Roc)
5. Kronos Quartet - Caravan (Nonesuch)
6. Various Artists - Cambodian Rocks (Parallel World)
7. Roland Alphonso - Something Special: Ska Hot Shots (Heartbeat)
8. Rosa Passos - The Best of ... (Velas)
9. Shins - "When I Goose Step" 7" (Omnibus)
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