

‘Lucky You’ vs. ‘Rounders’: Bana is No Norton, Duvall is No Malkovich

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on May 10, 2007 - 6:51pm

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CHICAGO – “[Lucky You](#) [17]” undoes what “[Rounders](#) [18]” did right.

In the 1998 masterpiece, [Matt Damon](#) [19] and [Edward Norton](#) [20] exquisitely depict all that is divine about the game of Texas Hold ‘Em for rookies and old hands alike.

“Rounders” is among the best, most accurate and most riveting portrayals of all the delights and dodgy drawbacks of poker.



Huck Cheever (Eric Bana) teaches Billie Offer (Drew Barrymore)

the basics of poker.

Photo by Merie W. Wallace and courtesy of Warner Bros.

“Lucky You,” which was initially slated to be released on Sept. 8, 2006, is like watching a staid how-to video. It needed:

A little more [Robert Duvall](#) [21] with a bit more oomph.

A little more plausibility in [Eric Bana](#) [22]’s character.

A little more of a love story or perhaps none at all.

A lot less [Drew Barrymore](#) [23]. Holy hell.

A lot less juvenile instruction.

A much more compelling poker story.

Those unfamiliar with the fanatical human psychology and mathematics intrinsic to no-limit poker wouldn’t appreciate scenes like when the camera graces over various real-life phenoms.

In the film, Johnny Chan and Daniel Negreanu didn’t nab a seat at the final table of the World Series of Poker, which is the pantheon of cash games with the biggest action and the best players. “Lucky You” quietly cast these players and some two dozen others to rub their keen ways off on actors not born with their knack.

Those having played the game five times, though, would cringe at the film’s professional inaccuracies. Any poker player knows you can’t give or lend money to another while at a table and you most certainly can’t flip over the mucked cards of another player who has folded.

Especially in Las Vegas, you’d get warned and happily ejected. In this film, these moments were casual affairs that weren’t illustrated as improper. Even titling a film about poker with the word “lucky” wouldn’t ring holy to true poker players who will swear the game’s about skill.

Cast because of his mink face and slinky voice, Bana could have been worse and could have been better with a stronger script. He didn’t have enough to work with in a film that develops a love story around a one-night affair with no apparent sorcery thereafter.

If Bana is to win Barrymore’s heart, he “must learn to play cards the way he has been living life and live his life the way he has been playing cards,” director [Curtis Hanson](#) [24] – a longtime poker player himself – figured.

“The skills one must develop to be a good poker player are almost the exact opposite of the skills needed to be successful in a relationship,” Hanson said in the film’s production notes. “Deceit – or bluffing – which can destroy the trust needed for a successful personal relationship, is a big part of the game.”

As Barrymore sees Bana for the man he really is and the addiction he truly has, he persists in fumbling back to her. She inexplicably and naïvely takes back a man burdened by romantic entanglements that have been limited to brief flirtations and casual affairs with no promise.



Game on? Sort of.

Photo by Merie W. Wallace and courtesy of Warner Bros.

“[Barrymore’s character] really intends to be careful from now on and try and find ... someone who is not going to hurt her. Then, of course, she meets Huck, who is a classic heartbreaker. When he crosses the line, she will not be bluffed or charmed like the other women in his life.”

Is this the same film I screened? Not being bluffed means not taking him back.

Ultimately, I just didn’t feel the love between these two. They lacked chemistry, and rather than convincing you they were a couple who really could be a couple in real life, they revealed the fact that they’re actors working to be something they’re not.

This “love story” was set in 2003 to pay homage to the year poker changed forever. That pivotal year was when Internet poker was exploding and amateur poker players across the world were honing their skills. That was also the year when a camera for a player’s hole cards was introduced.

This entertainment tactic was created for enthusiasts at home to more closely follow the game and learn the nuances of how the masters bet and bluff.

The year 2003 was also when unknown player Chris Moneymaker took the poker world by storm by winning the World Series of Poker. Coming from an amateur background of playing online, his win inspired players everywhere into thinking the feat could be anyone else’s, too.

Hanson says Bana was chosen for the role of Huck Cheever – the son of maverick poker player L.C. Cheever (played by Robert Duvall) – because of his transformational characteristics.

“Like Huck, Bana is a blaster,” Hanson said. “He came at his part full out. He is a true chameleon. Unlike many actors who twist characters to fit their own personalities and characteristics, [Bana] looks at each part as an opportunity to truly become someone else.”

In the film, it is Bana’s strength at the poker table – despite his weakness to live up to his potential – that is traced backed to his distressed relationship with Duvall. The two are always competing and do so dangerously without coherence and with malice.



Daniel Negreanu (left) rehearses with Curtis Hanson (middle) and

Robert Duvall.

Photo by Merie W. Wallace and courtesy of Warner Bros.

For instance, they challenge each other to head's up poker in a seemingly innocent scene in a diner. Of course, a deck of cards is on hand along with stacks of \$100 bills. In a matter of minutes, Duvall ends up taking Bana's \$10,000 entry fee into the World Series of Poker.

"Huck is haunted by his father's reputation in the poker world," Bana said. "We see his behavior change when L.C. is around. He's a much more secure player when his father is not around and becomes ... hotheaded when L.C. is present."

Bana is often seen at his local pawn shop. His home has no furniture. He's always in debt. He's constantly looking for a couple hundred bucks to "play with the guppies" and multiply his stack. He often does and then loses it all. This compulsion and its inherent realities are familiar to over-the-edge poker players.

Bana even took a bet to run a few miles and finish a 18-hole game of golf in under three hours to snag some coin. He concedes that his real-life golf game is relatively laughable.

"The golf was the most daunting part of the making the film," Bana said. "My game had usually been of great comedic value to my friends. You could have nicknamed me 'The Slicer'. Curtis said: 'You have to swing like you have a four handicap.' I don't know how many free golf lessons I had but it was a lot."

You'd think it'd be more convincing to choose actors actually with a true background in the talents they're playing.

While Bana and Duvall do a decent job selling you on their skill for the game, many poker players could naturally act at a table better than many actors can learn to truly play poker. Hanson's leading men don't come from an intense past with the game.

In fact, Duvall in his initial acceptance of the role jested about whether or not he understood the difference between a flush and a straight. He learned some of the tricks of the trade from Doyle Brunson – a two-time World Series of Poker winner – who served as the film's poker consultant.



Duvall is solid, as usual, but he's no Malkovich.

Photo by Merie W. Wallace and courtesy of Warner Bros.

"I really didn't know if I could do this part because there was so much to learn," Duvall said. "I wish I could have gotten the script six months earlier ... because I almost had to decode it. I did my research and now I understand the game ... somewhat."

If Duvall's character would parallel the position in "Rounders," [John Malkovich](#) [25] holds the royal flush. Nine years ago, Teddy KGB – despite his iconic Oreo-twisting tell – was a bona fide crackerjack of the game.

While the film meant to instill overarching statements of a father yearning to reach out to his son and a son longing to screw his head on

straight, the concepts were left underdeveloped and overshadowed by the footage of learning the game and the time spent playing it.

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Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 19 2024 - 1:45am*): <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/2007/05/lucky-you-vs-rounders-bana-is-no-norton.html>

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