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A croupier's eye view

Observations
Hannah Mackay
Monday 18th October 2004

Observations on casino life. By **Hannah Mackay**

When I left university three years ago, I worked as a croupier in a London casino. It wasn't the gambling I sought, but the night hours: during the day, I was struggling to be an actress. According to a survey by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, I was one of only 2 per cent of the British public who ever set foot in a casino. The other 98 per cent formulate opinions about the casino life, basing them on the odd Ian Fleming novel. Most casinos, in my experience, actually resemble an exceptionally miserable Mike Leigh film. James Bond is nowhere in sight.

At present, casinos face a blanket ban on advertising. Because it cannot tout for business, the London casino circuit is an extremely closed world in which the same faces - staff and punters - appear over and over again. I used to recognise about 75 per cent of the customers by sight. Because of the infamous "24-hour rule" (which means you cannot enter a casino until 24 hours after you have registered as a member), casual walk-ins hardly ever happen.

Casinos are at present required by law to display Gamcare leaflets - Gamcare being the national association for problem gamblers. Problem gambling is the great unmentionable - there is no reference to it at all in the current legislation (which has not been amended significantly since 1968). The gambling industry wants desperately to convince you that gambling is a "leisure" pursuit, no more harmful than, say, tenpin bowling.

As croupiers, we were encouraged to report to our superiors anyone we considered a "problem gambler" - that is to say, anyone who was unable to stop and was betting beyond their means. In reality when a report was made, the casino managers were reluctant to act against the man. He was, after all, a punter.

The implications of losing money at a casino are entirely relative to the player. I remember one punter in particular, a Saudi millionaire (honest). I dealt blackjack to him for three hours and during that time I was drawing aces, and he was busting nearly every hand. Behind him, his bodyguard was shifting uneasily from foot to foot. At the end of the night, the Saudi gambler shook his head, frowned, shrugged, laughed, and walked out. He had just lost about £100,000, but to him the amount was negligible.

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Earlier that very week, at the same table, I had dealt to a heavily pregnant Chinese woman. She cashed in £50 at midnight and played cautiously, making it last. She lost her £50 in the last five minutes of gaming, at which point her smile dropped and she began to cry, saying: "My baby's milk money! All my baby's milk money! All gone!" Whether it was true or not, I'm not sure. But no doubt that £50, to her, was a fortune way beyond her means. The casino was happy to take it from her. That, after all, is what casinos are there for.

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