

Written by Administrator
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It's a true story that's stranger than fiction. A devoutly religious lobbyist conspired with Indian tribes, corrupt politicians and a sleazy mattress salesman to muscle into the gaming business. Oh, and he may have funneled missiles to terrorists and sanctioned the murder of a business associate.

A filmmaker

could shoehorn such incidents into a topical thriller or even a miniseries. Director George Hickenlooper, the native St. Louisan who died Oct. 30, turned the scandal of superlobbyist Jack Abramoff into a character-driven dramedy. Hickenlooper and co-conspirator Kevin Spacey are more successful at entertaining than informing or enraging us, but such a tart soufflé may be the best way for a fed-up public to digest this distasteful story.

In Spacey's great return-to-form performance, Abramoff is like a gym teacher in a community production of "Glengarry Glen Ross." But while Abramoff is an amateur entertainer, with a hambone habit of quoting movie dialogue, he's the pro's pro among Washington lobbyists, an insider who bribes legislators on behalf of tax-dodging corporations.

In the post-millennial free-for-all, Abramoff and his amoral young sidekick Michael Scanlon (Barry Pepper) aren't satisfied with enriching just their clients. After they extract millions of dollars from competing Indian tribes bidding for casino licenses, the high-flying lobbyists crave a piece of the action for themselves. Abramoff enlists an old College Republicans chum, a crass mattress peddler named Adam Kidan (Jon Lovitz, a true guilty pleasure), to be the front man in buying a Florida casino boat from shady Gus Boulis (Daniel Kash).

Scanlon and Kidan are the slick and the sticky sides of the same coin, so it's not a shock when their scheme leads to a Mafia hit man (the late, great character actor Maury Chaykin) who makes Boulis a final offer.

But Abramoff is a more complex if not sympathetic character. True, he's a back-slapping shakedown artist and maybe even an illegal arms dealer (although the latter accusation is beyond the purview of the movie), but he's also a loyal husband (to Kelly Preston) and a philanthropist who uses his loot to fund a Hebrew school and Washington's first kosher deli.

Spacey returns to form as lobbyist Abramoff in 'Casino Jack' - St. Louis Post-Dispatch

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And when Abramoff gets busted and denounces the outraged politicians who are just as crooked as he is, the cynical script by Norman Snider has given us little room for argument.

Ironically, when everyone in Washington is depicted as a greedy swine, the individual acts of piggishness lose their satirical bite, and this farcical flick doesn't have a hero to echo the pain that such corruption is causing to the taxpaying public.

Alas, it's too much trouble to connect the dots from bribery to bank failures to the battlefields of the Middle East when we can simply turn on our televisions and see Abramoff's crony Tom DeLay on "Dancing With the Stars."

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