

The frustrating irony of *Casino Jack* - director George Hickenlooper's overinflated account of super-lobbyist Jack Abramoff's downfall - is that its protagonist, played with hammy exuberance by Kevin Spacey, emerges with even less clarity than he does in the documentary *Casino*

Jack and the United States of Money, which came out in the spring, and in which Abramoff barely appears.

The doc, full of C-Span clips, talking heads, and archival footage, told the same story: a charismatic hustler from Orthodox Jewish roots who worshipped Ronald Reagan, chaired the College Republican National Committee, produced a Dolph Lundgren action pic, set up shop in the capital, and became its preeminent pay-for-play power broker. He earned millions from sweatshop bosses in the Northern Marianas, and scammed American Indian casino owners out of millions more, Abramoff's hubris and avarice getting the better of him.

One day he's hobnobbing with Bush White House big shots, the next he's on trial charged with fraud, tax evasion, and conspiring to bribe public officials. Abramoff pleaded guilty in 2006 and spent the rest of the decade in jail.

Abramoff was barred from being interviewed in Alex Gibney's documentary by prison officials, but observations from the lobbyist's associates - like Neil Volz's rich quote, "Jack Abramoff could sweet-talk a dog off a meat truck" - painted a pretty good picture. In *Casino Jack*, alas, Spacey never conveys that slippery charm; instead, the actor's Abramoff comes off as a smug smoothie, high-fiving his right-hand man (Barry Pepper), banking wads of money, and doing bad impressions of famous people (Bill Clinton, Al Pacino, Stallone's Rocky) that he thinks are brilliant. It's a slick but soulless performance.

Hickenlooper, who died in November of a heart attack, made documentaries and features about outsiders who insinuated themselves into spheres of power and the arts: Rodney Bingenheimer, the groupie-turned-rock impresario of *Mayor of the Sunset Strip*; Edie Sedgwick, the Warhol muse of *Factory Girl*. And in Hickenlooper's best film, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, he shows Francis Ford Coppola's world crumbling as he struggles to keep *Apocalypse Now* from tanking in a jungle of production disasters and personal and political crises.

Written by Administrator

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Unlike Coppola, who managed, in spite of all the craziness, to keep things together (barely!), Abramoff becomes witness to his own disgrace and demise. It *is* a great story - with shady characters inside and outside the Beltway, and even a mob-style hit. But tonally,

Casino Jack

is all over the place: exaggerated comedy, cartoonish high jinks, then heavy-handed melodrama (a third-act face-off between Abramoff and his wife, played with no center of gravity by Kelly Preston, comes out of nowhere). And what ex-

Saturday Night Live

funnyman Jon Lovitz is doing here - he's an oily moneybags, fronting one of Abramoff's scams - is anybody's guess.

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