

So often when someone's name becomes a headline their identity as a person tends to fade into the background.

Such was the case with Jack Abramoff, a man whose name became synonymous with "evil lobbyist" and who went on to confirm basically everything we had ever assumed about the morally-ambiguous

profession.

The movie "Casino Jack" attempts to find the man behind the "jerk-who-got-what-was-coming-to-him" sentiments, and while the results are mixed, it does provide an interesting window into the heights of corruption of the Bush years.

Abramoff is played by Kevin Spacey, an actor who knows a thing or two about elusive characters. As a lobbyist, Abramoff masterfully turned power and influence into cold, hard cash thanks to a lot of fast talking and charm, two things that Spacey does best.

But Spacey also manages to capture the inevitability of the character, in that when you introduce someone as intelligent and ambitious as Abramoff to Washington's halls of power he has no other path than the road to ruin. It is not surprising at all that Spacey has already snagged a Golden Globe nomination for Best Actor.

Along for the ride is Jack's wife, Pam (Kelly Preston), who is willfully oblivious to Jack's wheelings and dealings, although to her credit, he does a nifty job of keeping her in the dark.

Jack's partner, Michael Scanlon, is grandiosely played by Barry Pepper in a part so slimy it's amazing he doesn't leave a glistening trail behind him when he walks.

While Jack does manage to maintain a few delusions of moral integrity, Michael takes corruption and greed to obnoxious new heights. If you saw this guy at a bar you would patiently wait for someone to come up and punch him in the face.

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I would be remiss if I didn't mention Jon Lovitz as Jack's lowlife buddy, Adam Kidan, whose shady business connections lead to alternately hilarious and violent confrontations. It shouldn't come as that much of a surprise that this "Saturday Night Live" alum could perform admirably among master thespians. Acting! Genius!

If "Casino Jack" had remained as more of a character study, it would have been a much more effective movie, but it gets bogged down in its attempts to break down all of the plots, schemes and machinations that led to Abramoff's downfall.

Director George Hickenlooper has worked primarily as a documentary filmmaker, which helps to explain the movie's focus on the Who? What? When? and Where? while shortchanging the Why?

There is not much cinematic about this movie with the notable exception of a scene where Jack imagines himself delivering a verbal tirade during a Senate subcommittee hearing.

Ultimately "Casino Jack" has the feel of a made-for-TV movie meant to incite rage at the atmosphere created by the Bush administration that allowed the Jack Abramoffs of the world to flourish.

It is because of the smallness of the scope of the film that Spacey's killer performance seems a bit wasted. Still, the movie does manage to shed a little light on this classic tale of ambition spiraling out of control for those of us who were just too lazy to read beyond the headlines.

"Casino Jack" is rated R for pervasive language, some violence and brief nudity.

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