

Written by Administrator
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Casino Jack

(R)

1 1/2 out of 4 stars

Rarely are movie lovers and/or political junkies afforded this kind of plum opportunity, so if you're one or both, take note.

Option one: For the cost of coffee and a doughnut, you could rent the documentary "Casino Jack and the United States of Money" and be enlightened, educated and highly entertained in the comfort of your own living room. Option two: Leave your home in the dead of winter and pick one of only two theaters showing "Casino Jack," plunk down \$10 per head and then experience one of the most squandered cinematic offerings of 2010.

Cutting his teeth during the Reagan administration, Jack Abramoff (Kevin Spacey) connected himself with every key lawmaker in Washington and by the turn of the century was arguably the most influential lobbyist in the nation's history. Like many a man before him drunk with power and convinced of his own invincibility, Abramoff eventually took too many stupid chances and stepped on too many important peoples' toes.

In Abramoff, recently deceased director George Hickenlooper, his screenwriter Norman Snider and their 14 producers had the most potently tragic and mineable political figure since Richard Nixon and they completely missed the mark. Instead of straight-ahead drama or deep black comedy, the filmmakers mix melodrama, slapstick and farce into what is little more than a series of moronic "Saturday Night Live" skits. The miscasting of former "SNL" cast member Jon Lovitz in a key role only adds to this feeling.

Usually able to completely disappear into his characters, the two-time Oscar-winner Spacey mistakenly seizes on Abramoff's penchant for celebrity impersonations and makes it his principal focus. Himself a noted mimic, Spacey riffs on nearly two dozen actors and famous scenes from movies and every time he opens his mouth he takes the audience completely out of the moment. On top of that he bears little resemblance to the much larger Abramoff and never once do we get the impression that he's even trying. The film is a defacto Spacey audition/clip

/outtake reel and his performance here is the laziest of his career.

While Snider concentrates heavily the two high-profile scams that eventually brought Abramoff down, he fails to include a single sliver of data regarding his unique Hollywood upbringing or his laser-focused, unflinching rise to power. Watching a mighty man like Abramoff fall isn't all that

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engaging unless we're also made aware of his relatively humble, determined origins. We are never given any opportunity to develop any empathy or a reason to like or respect him, if only temporarily.

The only portion of the movie the filmmakers get right is Abramoff's quasi-sinister relationship with former House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, his main congressional contact and "business partner." Played with unerring restraint by Spencer Garrett, DeLay and his own fall in some ways was more tragic and telling than Abramoff's and it deserves a movie of its own. DeLay was sentenced just this past Monday to three years in prison for his crimes.

In the great scheme of things what Abramoff did wasn't quite as slimy or despicable as the con orchestrated by Bernie Madoff but it comes close. The difference was Madoff knew he was in the wrong and Abramoff was totally convinced he was doing the right thing. He entered politics with the fervor and dedication of a patriot and left a total disgrace. It's the true modern version of an age-old human tragedy that you'll never glean or recognize by anything seen in this film. (ATO)

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