

Right-wing Washington lobbyist Jack Abramoff was as crooked as a corkscrew. In his pursuit of tens of millions of dollars in lobbying fees, he bribed politicians, laundered money and bilked his own clients, actually lobbying against Indian tribes he represented to keep the money flowing. He helped thwart Congressional efforts to reform sweatshops in

the Northern Marianas Islands, a U.S. protectorate. His offenses weren't just white-collar flimflam. Abramoff's scheme to gain control of a casino cruise line led to a gangland-style murder.

But when the influence peddler looked in the mirror he saw an honest man.

"Casino Jack" is a fact-based comedy-drama about the power of rationalization. In an introductory rant, Abramoff (sympathetically played by Kevin Spacey) gives his reflection a pep talk while freshening up for a business meeting. Furiously brushing his incisors, he delivers a heated aria of self-justifying balderdash. "You're either a big leaguer or you're a slave clawing your way onto the C train," he declares, vowing "I will not allow my family to be slaves." "You say I'm selfish," he continues to his likeness, spitting a profane insult, "I give back plenty."

He's a devout but morally blinkered religionist who uses his swag to build a Hebrew school for his kids (and to live like a pasha and open high-roller restaurants). He informs his interfaith Bible study club, "In Biblical times, taxes never rose above 20 per cent," as if that was God's own economic plan. The term Pharisee comes to mind.

Spacey specializes in morally ambiguous antiheroes, and his Abramoff really seems to believe his own guff. He's a glib hustler, sure, but he'd argue that he's hardly worse than the rest of the wheeler-dealers in Washington.

The film doesn't sit in judgment, either, though that may reflect its lack of focus rather than intentional evenhandedness. The script is a welter of tones. Real historical figures appear (John McCain is edited into a Congressional hearing) alongside actors portraying politicians including Tom DeLay, Ralph Reed, Bob Ney and Grover Norquist. Abramoff's head-spinning history of backstory details, political connections and misdeeds races past too quickly to register. The film tries to encompass all of Abramoff's encyclopedic chicanery and chokes on the sheer volume.

If Abramoff comes off as a slick but soulless cypher given to eruptions of cornball machismo, his co-conspirators are entertaining buffoons. Jon Lovitz does an impish turn as a mobbed-up slimeball mattress tycoon fronting Abramoff's cruise-ship casino scheme. The formidable character actor Maury Chaykin makes every line a zinger as a fat old hired gun. As the lobbyist's junior partner, Michael Scanlon, Barry Pepper is too focused on giving his new oceanfront mansion the proper feng shui to recognize the fast-approaching hoofbeats of fate. He's the sort of semi-slick fop who orders the best Bordeaux - with three ice cubes. Less effective is Kelly Preston as Mrs. Abramoff, who is given the classic hand-wringing "what's become of us?" scene.

Directed by the late George Hickenlooper, "Casino Jack" is a flawed companion piece to Alex Gibney's superior political documentary "Casino Jack and the United States of Money." Smug when it should be stiletto-sharp, fast-paced yet tedious, it's an unfortunate misfire.

There's a good line in the script spoken after the main character's demise, as his former friends scatter like roaches: "You're nobody in this town unless you don't know Jack Abramoff." Unfortunately when the film is over, we don't know him either.

CASINO JACK

2 stars

Starring: Kevin Spacey, Barry Pepper, Maury Chaykin, Kelly Preston, Jon Lovitz

Directed by: George Hickenlooper

Rated R for some language

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Written by Administrator

Friday, 14 January 2011 02:12 -

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